

SPURRELL, W. J.



Note: Some sources have ascribed the Service Number 869x to Seaman Walter John Spurrell. The correct number appears to be 969x whereas 869x was that of a Seaman Joseph Albert Samson.

Seaman Walter John Spurrell, Service Number 969x, having no known last resting-place (although see further below) is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Walter John Spurrell had originally presented himself for enlistment on November 18 of 1910, whereupon he was to undergo a recorded twenty-eight days of training, terminating in December of that same year.

As with all pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years and was to undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days on four occasions during the following thirty-eight months. All of November of 1913 saw his final term of training on *Calypso* before events were to intervene eight months later and he was to be called to war-time service.

Summoned from home to service at the onset of hostilities, Walter John Spurrell travelled from his family residence in Trinity East* to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on August 5 of 1914 – only a single day following the British *Declaration of War* – he was once again to report...to duty...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

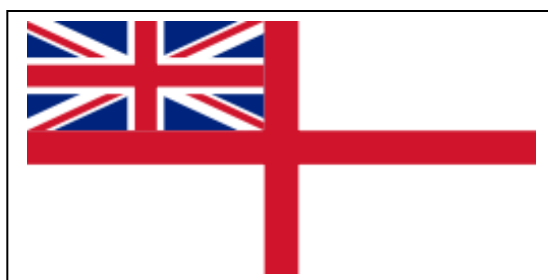


**Some retrospective birth records from Québec appear to show that his parents John and Diana were in that province in the early years of the twentieth century. They appear again in the 1921 Census for Montréal with three of their youngest sons. Where they were in 1914 is not clear, although, of course, Walter John was married by that time and surely living in Cuckold's Cove (today Dunfield).*

On that above-mentioned early-August day, Walter John Spurrell was signed on for wartime service, perhaps only a single year*, and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

(Preceding page: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior Service. – The photograph of the King in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site, taken in or about 1935.)*

**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.*



(Right above: *The White Ensign has been flown by the Royal Navy in its present form since about the year 1800 although other naval ensigns had existed for at least two centuries. It consists of a red St. George's Cross – the national flag of England - on a white field with the Union Flag* in the upper canton.*)

**The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the 'Union Jack'; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a 'Jack' only when flown from the bow of a ship.*

Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion in 1870 before the Reserve came into being in 1902.

Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it is perhaps not surprising that these volunteers – mostly fishermen – were to opt to train during the winter months when fishing work was at a minimum.

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Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.

Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.

An elderly vessel, H.M.S. 'Calypso', having become surplus to the Admiralty's needs, had been provided to the Dominion of Newfoundland by the Royal Navy in 1902 for training purposes. After some debate it was eventually decided that she would be permanently moored in the harbour of the capital, her superstructure reduced, and a wooden shelter built on her upper deck to provide training facilities and living quarters for the prospective naval recruits.



(Right: H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – photograph by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

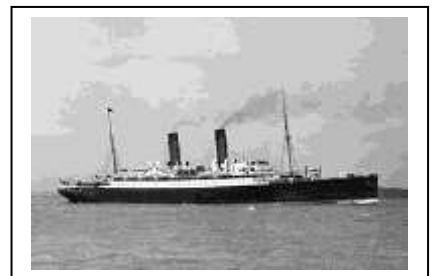
Following some three months of duties in St. John's – no further training has been recorded - Seaman Spurrell, one of a draft of three-hundred five Naval Reservists, embarked in St. John's on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner Franconia on the British-bound journey of its commercial route between New York and Liverpool.



(Right: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)

Once having arrived in the port-city of Liverpool on November 11, it appears that several of the men were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases only hours later.

(Right: A relatively new vessel, 'Franconia' had been launched on July 23 of 1910. Remaining un-requisitioned as a troop transport until early 1915, it was to be well over a year later that on 4 October, 1916, while heading for Salonika, she was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine to the east of Malta She was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – photograph from Wikipedia)



Seaman Spurrell was not immediately dispatched to a ship, although he soon would be. But at first he was sent to serve until on or about December 7 of the same year at the Royal Naval training establishment *Vivid I** - this Division for seamen rather than for specialists such as engine-room personnel, for example - based at Plymouth-Devonport.

(Page following: *An imposing main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport which stands to this day.* – photograph from 2011(?))

**‘Vivid’ was the name of a series of pre-War and, later, post-War training stations – although during the war it was to revert to the role of a shore-base and barracks - in the counties of Devon and Cornwall, and at other sites in the United Kingdom. It was also the name of an elderly, obsolescent, vessel to which all of the hundreds, even thousands, of the personnel serving in the myriad stations were attached, officially even if, as in many cases, they were never to set foot on or even see the ship.*



All of this was because of the Naval Discipline Act. The rules and regulations covering the conduct of Royal Navy personnel was unique unto itself, and in order for any sailor to be governed by the Act, he had to be part of a ship’s crew. If he were serving on land, he still had to be a member of a ship’s crew for the Naval Discipline Act to be in effect.

It was often for this reason only that an old ship and the shore-based establishment shared the same name. In the case of ‘Vivid’ it was an old gun-boat, originally launched in 1873, which served the purpose, at the same time to be used as a harbour-service vessel.

On the above-suggested December 6-7, Seaman Spurrell was transferred from *Vivid I* on land to HMS *Oropesa* to serve at sea. She was a merchant ship of some five-thousand three-hundred tons which had been built in 1895 for the *Pacific Steam Navigation Company*. Early in the conflict she had been requisitioned by the Admiralty, re-fitted and armed with six six-inch guns and two three-pounder weapons before being put into war-time service on November 22 of 1914.



(Right above: *In December of 1915 she was transferred to French command and re-named ‘Champagne’; she remained a ship of the Marine nationale until late July, 1917, when she reverted to British control – but retained her new name. Ten weeks and four days later she was sunk by U-boat 96 off the east coast of Ireland with a loss of forty-seven lives.* – The photograph of her in port in Chile (1915) is from the *shipsnostalgia.com* web-site.)

Seaman Spurrell was not to be serving on *Champagne* at the time of her loss; he was, however, a member of her crew when she was the British ship *Oropesa* and, according to his scant Service Record, he was still on her until December 3, 1915, the day following her transfer into French hands.

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There appears nothing in the available records to suggest other than that the twelve months during which he sailed on her comprised anything other than the everyday routines of service life on one of his Majesty's ships.

On December 4 he was back on the books at *Vivid I*, the holding barracks for seamen at Plymouth-Devonport, perhaps awaiting a further posting. After some five weeks he was to receive instead was an attachment to another Royal Naval shore-based attachment: *HMS President III*.

The above-mentioned Royal Navy establishment, *President III*, had initially been located in London where the original – floating – *President* had been opened in 1862 to serve as a drill-ship for recruits of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. *President III*, however, was not a vessel but one of several Divisions to evolve as the *Great War* progressed and was to deal primarily with ships' finances and accountancy, its offices at times located outside the capital city.



(Right above: *During the period of Seaman Spurrell's posting to HMS 'President III', the sloop HMS 'Buzzard' moored on the River Thames had taken on the mantle of HMS 'President' although whether or not Seaman Spurrell would have set foot on her deck – or even seen her – is not clear. – photograph from Wikipedia)*

It is unlikely that Seaman Spurrell was to become much involved with the Royal Navy's finances during this period. But as to exactly what his tasks and duties may have been, the documents are not forthcoming. He was to be the responsibility of *President III* for just more than a year*.

**There is the word...Demobilized...to be found in the margin of his personal file; in other like cases this has signified that the seaman in question had been granted a month-long period of furlough at home in Newfoundland. However, the author has been unable as yet to find any reliable evidence that this was the case of Seaman Spurrell – the sources often cite numbers (not service numbers) without associating them with names.*

Seaman Spurrell was to remain attached to *President III* until the last day of January of 1917. Then he was reattached anew on the morrow, although on this occasion it would seem that he in fact was to be dispatched to serve on a cargo ship.

(Right: *The photograph of the SS 'Torrington' is from the 'National Museum of Wales'. The inset is of her captain, Anthony Starkey. Taken prisoner on board the U-boat 55, he was to be the only survivors of the incident, the others all apparently killed by the Germans. It may be that the photograph was taken in 1914.*)



The *SS Torrington* at the time of her construction in 1905 was said to be one of the largest cargo-carriers afloat but although one source has her weighing over nine-thousand tons, she is mostly recorded as being in-between five and six thousand.

The records suggest that Seaman Spurrell joined *Torrington* on or about February 1 of 1917 although where exactly he was to do so is not to be found among his papers. The ship was later intercepted on her way back from Italy to the United Kingdom for a load of coal* by a U-boat so it may well be that Seaman Spurrell had been on the vessel for her outward journey – of which there appear to be no available records.

**She was apparently under contract to supply coal to the Italian railways.*

The sinking of the ship on April 8 of 1917 to the southwest of the Scilly Isles is one of the more notorious incidents in the naval history of the *Great War*. She was struck by a torpedo from the U-55 and began to sink. At this point the submarine surfaced and began to finish the task with her deck-gun. *Torrington's* captain, Anthony Starkey, thus gave the order to his crew to take to the two life-boats.

Captain Starkey was subsequently taken as a prisoner into the submarine and the crew members in that particular boat were ordered onto the deck of the U-boat. This life-boat was thereupon taken by the Germans back to the sinking *Torrington* in order to take on any supplies that could be found.

During this period the German captain ordered the submarine to submerge, thus drowning those on deck. Of the second life-boat there was apparently never a trace to be found apart from some provisions from it that were later seen by Captain Starkey inside the submarine*. Thirty-four men were to lose their life.

**Starkey, the only survivor of the incident was apparently told of the fate of his men left on the deck of the submarine – that they had drowned – by members of the German crew. He, Starkey, was to spend the remainder of the War as a prisoner. As for Kapitänleutnant Werner, after the War he fled to Brazil before he could be brought to trial. He returned to Germany to play an active part in the rise and rule of the Nazi party but, once again, he disappeared towards the end of the conflict.*



(Right above: A Memorial Scroll, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life while serving in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve)

The son of John Spurrell, carpenter, and of Diana (also found as *Dianna*) Spurrell (née *Piercie*), of Trouty, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, he was brother to Stephen, Reuben-Piercie, Kenneth(?), John, Orlando, Harriett, Frederick and to Pruten.

**The family records are at times scant, perhaps because the family appears by 1921 to have moved to Montreal and also because the relevant Methodist (United Church) Parish Records – of Trinity, Dunfield - were apparently destroyed in a fire in January of 1916.*



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(Preceding page: *The sacrifice of Seaman Walter John Spurrell is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the community of Trinity, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland. – photograph from 2011*)

His wife Diana having passed away in Montréal in 1935, John Spurrell re-married two years later, to a Miss Mary Hughes.

Walter John Spurrell had married Elizabeth (known as *Lizzie*) Anne Clifford on December 18, 1912, at Cuckold's Cove (later re-named *Dunfield*), Trinity Bay. After the death of her husband, on December 11, 1920, she was to marry ex-school-master John Tait.



Seaman Spurrell was a *recorded* twenty-seven years of age at the time of his death on April 8-9, 1917 – not July 1, 1917, as found in a copy of Newfoundland Vital Statistics: date of birth in Trinity East, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, March 28, 1890 (likely not May of 1896 as documented in Royal Navy records).

(Right: *The Trinity Bay community of Trouty also honours the sacrifice of Walter John Spurrell. – photograph from 2015*)

Seaman Walter John Spurrell served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as is cited in some sources notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Walter John Spurrell was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal (centre), and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 20, 2023.