

ST. CROIX, W.



Seaman-Gunner William St. Croix, Number 1222x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, fisherman William St. Croix travelled from the southern reaches of the Avalon Peninsula, from Trepassey to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on September 2 – a second source has October 2* (but see below) - of 1914, he reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same September 2, William St. Croix enlisted into the Naval Reserve for a first time (see further below), signed to undertake a five-year period of service*, was to undergo the satisfactory mandatory medical assessment on the same day and thereupon commenced the requisite twenty-eight day training course which concluded on a recorded September 29.

He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

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(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 attired in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site and taken in or about 1935.*)

(Right: *At the outset of their career, the ‘Calypso-Class’ ships were apparently considered to be superior vessels. Hybrids - powered by both steam and sail - they were able to police the outer reaches of the British Empire most efficiently and economically. The rapid progress in engine technology, however, was to mean that HMS ‘Calypso’ and her sister-ships would soon be out-classed by newer vessels. – This Royal Navy photograph, taken before 1902 when the drill-hall was reportedly built on her upper deck and the funnel removed, is from Wikipedia*)



**In the early days 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, some thirty years were then to pass after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion in the year 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 minimal.

(Preceding page: *Recruits of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) seen here in front of HMS 'Calypso'. The shed-like superstructure seen behind them had been built onto the ship in 1902 to serve as a drill-hall. Whether the vessel was still 'Calypso', or had become 'Briton' by this time (see further below) is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial Archives via Wikipedia)*

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.



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

An elderly vessel, HMS '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 above: *HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was about to be launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph, taken of her by the Royal Navy, taken in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)*

Following those afore-mentioned five weeks of service spent in St. John's, Seaman St. Croix, promoted by this time from the rank of seaman recruit and one of a draft of three-hundred nine Naval Reservists and officers, embarked on November 5-6 onto the *Cunard* ocean-liner *Franconia* which had arrived in St. John's from New York.

Their ship then having docked in the English port-city of Liverpool on November 12, several of the Reservists were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about November 13.

(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 U-boat to the east of Malta. The ship was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – the photograph is from Wikipedia)



Thus, likely on the aforementioned November 13, Seaman St. Croix was...taken on strength...at HMS Excellent, the Royal Navy gunnery school located on Whale Island at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth. He was to train there until December 11 when he was ordered to join his ship, HMS Viknor, likely destined to man one of the guns with which by that time the ship had been fitted.



(Right above: The Royal Navy Memorial which stands on the coast at Portsmouth and from where may be seen Whale Island – photograph from 1917)

(Right: Gunner-recruits drill on a 4.7-inch naval gun on Whale Island at some time during the Great War – from Wikipedia)



The Armed Merchant Cruiser Viknor was an elderly ship, obsolete and apparently under-powered with a top speed of only fourteen knots. In her earlier lives she had firstly been, as of 1888, the SS Atrato, before then having been re-named as the SS Viking in 1912. Upon the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 she had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty and baptized on a third occasion as HMS Viknor.



(Right: The obsolescent luxury cruise-liner 'Atrato' seen here in her pre-War condition – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)

At the time of Seaman-Gunner St. Croix's transfer to Viknor, the ship was apparently at the time based on the River Tyne in north-east England. She was not to leave port until December 28 and not to join her squadron (see below) until January 1.

'Viknor' was to be attached to the 10th Cruiser Squadron, also known as the Northern Patrol, a force originally having comprised out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-liners fitted with guns, some as elderly as a number of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.

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The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this these vessels had to patrol the area of stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

In early January the ships of the *Northern Patrol* stopped a Norwegian vessel, the *Bergensfjord*, and transferred a number of persons, one of them a suspected spy, to *Viknor*, she then being ordered to proceed to Liverpool.

From what is known about *Viknor*, she was hardly a vessel fit for the task at hand and January and February of 1915 were to apparently be particularly stormy. What is more, a German counterpart, the steamship *Berlin*, had recently been reported in the area sowing mines – one of which had already sunk the British battleship *Audacious* some three months before.

It still remains a bit of a mystery as to what happened to *Viknor* although it appears to be that either she fell victim to the bad weather or that she was sunk by a mine. All that may be said with any great certainty is that there was not to be a single survivor: of the crew of three-hundred two, including twenty-five of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), all were to perish*.

**Her wreck was found off the coast of County Donegal, Ireland, in the year 2006, but no firm conclusion was to come about as to the cause of the ship's sinking.*

(Right below: *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 Joseph St. Croix, fisherman – possibly deceased as a family source cites a Mr. Fred Walsh as having been William's guardian - and of Esther St. Croix (née *Taylor**, deceased of pulmonary tuberculosis on February 14 of 1896) of the community of Trepassey, he was also older brother to John Joseph.

**The couple was married in Trepassey on May 23 of 1892.*

Seaman-Gunner William Patrick *Sancroix* died on that January 13, 1915, at the at the *recorded* age of twenty-two years: date of birth in Trepassey, Newfoundland, March 10, 1893 (from the *My Newfoundland Ancestors* web-site and his enlistment papers) or March 11 of the same year (from a copy of Newfoundland Vital Statistics as are the name *Patrick* and also the spelling of his family name as *Sancroix*, found above).



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Seaman St. Croix 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-Gunner William Patrick St. Croix was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) and 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.