

WELLS. D.



Leading Seaman Daniel Wells, Service Number 833x, 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 volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Daniel Wells had initially presented himself for enlistment on November 16 of 1910, whereupon he was to undergo a recorded twenty-eight days of training, terminating on December 13 of that same year.

As with most pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years on the understanding that he would undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days. However, he was to complete only four such undertakings: January and February of 1914 saw his last such term of training on *Calypso* before world events intervened and he was to be called to war-time service.

Summoned from home *to service* at the onset of hostilities, Daniel Wells relinquished his occupation as a fisherman and travelled from his residence in Little Bay North, Green Bay, or Wild Cove, White Bay – both are recorded - to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. There, on August 22 of 1914 – eighteen days 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).

(continued)



On that above-mentioned August day, Daniel Wells was signed on for wartime service* 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 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, 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 minimal.

(Right: 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 on the point of being launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph by the Royal Navy in 1898 is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.)

At some time during the period of fourteen days following his arrival there was confirmation of Daniels Wells' rank as seaman. As seen above, he had already undergone the mandatory training earlier that year so what his duties were to be during those twenty-two days is not certain.

(continued)



But on September 5 he was to be seconded to the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy and would board the cruiser HMCS *Niobe* which at the time was in St. John's Harbour awaiting a detachment of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve.

(Preceding page: '*Niobe*', seen here in St. John's Harbour, was ceded by Great Britain to Canada on September 6 of 1910 to be the country's main naval vessel on its east coast. Superfluous to Royal Navy needs, she was an elderly... '1st Class Armoured Diadem Cruiser'... of eleven-thousand tons, armed with numerous guns, thirty-two altogether, and two torpedo-tubes.

However, by October of 1915 '*Niobe*' was worn out, to be disarmed and relegated to the role of harbour-service and headquarters ship in the harbour at Halifax). – from the collection of William Herbert Rose and Marmaduke Rose (by Courtesy of Bud (Donald Rose) and found in the *For Posterity's sake – an RCN Historical Project web-site*)



(Right: A naval tender carry Newfoundland Reservists from HMS '*Calypso*' to HMCS '*Niobe*'. – The photograph by *The Evening Telegram* is from the *Provincial Archives*.)

*Some sources refer to the ship – in 1914 - as HMS '*Niobe*', but on September 6, 1910, she was re-commissioned as HMCS '*Niobe*'.

By the time that the detachment of just over one-hundred Newfoundland Reservists* was to join the ship's complement on that September 5**, HMCS *Niobe* had already started her war-time service

*They were apparently needed as, when *Niobe* was being re-fitted and readied for war, many of her crew had been ordered to Canada's west coast and were unavailable when the ship herself had been prepared to sail after her repairs.

**Some few Reservists are recorded on their service records as having joined HMCS '*Niobe*' on October 15 but this is highly unlikely as '*Niobe*' had contact with two Royal Navy ships off New York as late as a quarter past six on the evening of October 13. Moreover, the discharge register of HMS '*Calypso*' documents that September 5 was indeed the date on which some of these men joined '*Niobe*' – the records of the others appear to be absent from the register.

HMCS *Niobe*'s first duty after having absorbed the Newfoundland Reservists into her crew was to escort the Royal Canadian Regiment from Halifax on its passage to Hamilton, Bermuda, where it was to become the island's garrison. This mission accomplished, the ship sailed northwards to patrol the waters of the Cabot Strait and the Straits of Belle Isle, a task she shared with a Royal Navy cruiser, HMS *Lancaster*.

Following this episode of but a few weeks, by mid-October of 1914 she was to be working with the Royal Navy's 4th Cruiser Squadron, also known as *Force 'H'*, which was responsible for the inspection of shipping off the east coast of the United States and as far south as the West Indies.

The United States was a neutral country at the time – she did not join the conflict until April of 1917 – and thus this patrolling and policing of the western Atlantic was the burden of the Royal Navy during the first years of the *Great War*, as was the blockading of German shipping in American harbours. The job involved intercepting merchant ships of all flags, the inspection of cargoes and at times the boarding and the escorting thereof under armed guard of shipping to an Allied – or Associated – port.

This often also involved a great deal of boredom with the exception, perhaps, of the few days – every three weeks or so – when the patrol ships put into Halifax or, less often, Bermuda for re-fuelling and the replenishment of other supplies.

HMCS *Niobe* was already an elderly ship and the continuous effort of those several months resulted in an elderly *worn-out* ship. Thus when she returned to Halifax in July of 1915, it was decided that she should remain there to become a depot ship and headquarters for the other, smaller, ships of the Royal Canadian Navy on Canada's east coast. *Niobe* was to remain in Halifax for the remainder of the conflict.

The Newfoundlanders of the Royal Naval Reserve were then to return to St. John's to serve on HMS *Calypso*, some for only a short period of duty, before being dispatched overseas to the United Kingdom and thence to ships of the Royal Navy.

Seaman Wells' Service Record shows that he was put back on the nominal roll of HMS *Calypso* on September 1 of 1915 – although this may have been partially only on paper. Some three weeks later he was on his way once more.

He was a seaman of the draft of one-hundred forty-four Royal Navy Reserve personnel which was to travel by rail across the island of Newfoundland to Port-aux-Basques overnight on September 23-24, 1915. The detachment then embarked on the *Reid Newfoundland* vessel, the SS *Kyle*, for passage to North Sydney where the ship docked on the morrow at ten minutes past five in the morning.



(Right above: *The SS 'Kyle', in important element of Newfoundland's history, is seen here beached at the western extreme of the harbour in Harbour Grace. –photograph from 2012)*

From there the Reservists were to travel by the *Inter-Continental Railway* to Québec City where they would be taken on board the SS *Sicilian* arriving from Montreal on her commercial route across the Atlantic to Liverpool.



(Right above: *The image of the SS 'Sicilian' at anchor(?) just off-shore is from the 'WikiTree' web-site.)*

It was likely at the end of the first week of October, 1915, and having disembarked in the afore-mentioned English port-city, that the Naval Reservists would thereupon have been either dispatched directly to a vessel or ordered to undergo further training – or otherwise

to simply await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships - at one of various Royal Naval land-based establishments, these for the most part operating around the coast of England.

In the case of Seaman Wells, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *HMS Pembroke I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until likely the end of the second week of November of that year – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned *HMS Pembroke* has not been made clear.

**There was also a series of ships named 'Pembroke', the last several of which were used as depot ships and for harbour service at Chatham. This is the 'HMS Pembroke' found on the cap-bands of the sailors who served there perhaps in their thousands - but who were never to set eyes on the actual ship in question.*

Naval discipline being distinct in some ways from the laws that governed other parties such as the Army and civilians, sailors had to be on the books of a serving naval vessel to be legally subject to naval law and order, even when these sailors were serving on land.

Thus the presence of elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments which were known as stone frigates. The ships were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, even thousands of men who laboured on shore.

(Right: A part of the large Royal Navy complex which was the *HMS 'Pembroke'* naval establishment at Chatham for just over one hundred years. Today it has been transformed into a university campus. – photograph from 2010)



Seaman Wells was to remain on the nominal roll call of *Pembroke I*, until March 26 of the following year. On that day he was transferred – perhaps physically, perhaps bureaucratically – to a second naval shore-based facility: *HMS President III*. But just sixteen days prior to that move, he had received promotion; thus it was (Acting) Leading Seaman Wells who was dispatched from *HMS Pembroke I*.

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 Wells' posting to HMS 'President III', the sloop HMS 'Buzzard' moored on the River Thames was wearing the mantle of HMS 'President' although whether or not Seaman Wells would have set foot on her deck – or even seen her – is not clear. – photograph from Wikipedia)*

(Acting) Leading Seaman Wells is documented in his sparse Service Record as having been attached to *President III* for almost two years although it is fairly certain that during this period he had little input into the financial affairs of the Royal Navy. During the time from March 27, 1916, until January 31 of 1917, and again from then February 2 (the next day), 1917 until December 30 of the same year, dates found on his personal file, the abbreviations...*Demob**...and...*Remob**...are placed in the margin of the page, entries which suggest that he was to travel home to Newfoundland on furlough – a month was usually granted, plus allowance for travel.

**Demobilization and Remobilization*

On November 23 of 1916 the SS *Kyle* (seen further above) crossed from Port aux Basques to North Sydney. Among those on board was a D. Wells – reportedly aged twenty-five years – making the journey on his way to Halifax. There apparently being little further information available, one might speculate this to have been (Acting) Leading Seaman Wells on his return to the United Kingdom to take ship from Halifax - but it *is* speculation.

What (Acting) Leading Seaman Wells' duties and tasks otherwise were during that long period is not to be found in his records; although that no ship is mentioned apparently does not preclude his having served on one.

It is sure, of course, that he eventually did so, and it is likely that he did so from October 31 of 1917 until March 17, 1918. The vessel to which he was to be attached was the small – less than a thousand tons - steamship, the SS *Sea Gull*.

On the aforesaid March 17, 1918, *Sea Gull* was on her way with a general cargo from the French port of Le Havre to Liverpool when she was torpedoed by the German submarine, *U-Boat 103*, off Lynas Point, Wales, as she was turning towards the final approach to her destination.



Twenty of her crew were lost, including two men from Royal Naval Reserves, (Acting) Leading Seaman Wells one of them.

(Right above: *The photograph of the steamship 'Sea Gull' is from the 'wrecksite.eu' website.*)

The son of David Wells, fisherman, and of Mary Jane (née *Berge?*), of Wild Cove, White Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Jabez and to Edgar-John.

(Right: *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*)

(Acting) Leading Seaman Daniel Wells is documented as having *drowned* at the *reported* age of twenty-nine years of age in the loss of the steamer SS *Sea Gull* on March 17 of 1918: date of birth in Wild Cove, White Bay, Newfoundland, March 1, 1889 (from Methodist Parish (Nipper's Harbour) and Royal Navy Records).



Seaman Wells served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada – only seconded to ‘Niobe’ - as is cited in some sources, notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Daniel Wells 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.