



Seaman Thomas Joseph Whelan, Number 1170x, lies in the Military Plot in the Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery, St. John's.

Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Thomas Joseph Whelan had initially presented himself for enlistment into the Naval Reserve on January 9 of 1914, whereupon he was to undergo a twenty-eight day period of training which would terminate on the fifth day of the following month.

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There appears to be no indication of for how long Thomas Joseph Whelan had been engaged – for most pre-War volunteers it was for five years which was to comprise a period of training each year; it may have been so, but as it was with most people of that time, he had not foreseen the swift evolution of world events during the seven months to come; thus the afore-mentioned period of twenty-eight days in early 1914 was to be the only such training that he was to undergo.

He was summoned from home *to service* some four months subsequent to the British *Declaration of War* of August 4, 1914. Thomas Joseph Whelan thus relinquished his occupation – likely that of fisherman – and travelled from Placentia Bay to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where on December 1 he was again to report...*to duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).



On that late-autumn day he was signed on for wartime service* and it was also likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that Thomas Joseph Whelan attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

(Right above: *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.)

(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.*



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(Preceding page: 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 above: 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.



A branch of the ocean service from Britain's oldest colony. Naval reservists before leaving Newfoundland to serve in the Empire's cause.

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, 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.

(Preceding page: 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 in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

Apparently during the two weeks and two days* after having reported to Calypso in St. John's, Seaman Recruit Whelan was promoted to the rank of Seaman. Thus on December 17 it was the now-Seaman Whelan who was one of a draft of one-hundred fifty-three Naval volunteers to board the steamship Mongolian in St. John's Harbour for passage across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The ship sailed for the Scottish port-city of Glasgow at four o'clock on that same afternoon.



SS Mongolian

(Right above: Built in 1891 for use by the Allan Line for the transport of emigrants from Europe to North America, 'Mongolian' was a slow vessel with a speed of just twelve knots and was, by 1914, becoming obsolescent. She was nevertheless to be bought in 1914 for use by the Admiralty and remained in service until July 21 of 1918 when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – photograph from the British Home Child Group International web-site)

As seen above, Glasgow was to be Seaman Whelan's draft's destination. Upon disembarkation the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training – or to simply wait - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part sited around the coast of southern England.

In the case of Seaman Whelan, this first attachment was to be to the Gunnery School of the Royal Navy, HMS Excellent*, situated on Whale Island which guarded the Royal Navy harbour and associated facilities of the English south-coast port-city of Portsmouth at almost the other end of the country.

***The Royal Navy's Gunnery School which had been established in a ship of the same name in 1829, the vessel being permanently moored just outside Portsmouth dockyard. As the years passed the ships were to be replaced, but each in turn was to be named HMS 'Excellent'.**



(Right: Drill on a naval gun on 'Whale Island' – from Wikipedia)

And as those years passed, the use evolved of the nearby ‘Whale (originally ‘Whaley’) Island’ as facilities were constructed on it. In 1885 the Gunnery School was moved from the ship of the time to be re-established on the island itself.

It was a move which was to complicate things administratively.

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 at a ‘stone-frigate’, as these land-based facilities came to be known.

Thus the use of elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, even thousands of men who laboured ashore in naval uniform – and who often were never to set foot on the ship in question.

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



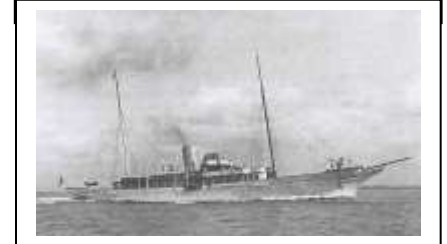
Which is why Seaman Whelan would likely have worn an HMS ‘Excellent’ cap-band...but for only six weeks.

On January 29-30 Seaman Whelan was transferred across the mouth of the harbour to the naval land-based establishment of *Victory I*, a posting which was to last for four weeks at which time he was ordered to *Victory II* which was the Division of HMS *Victory* which trained engine-room personnel – and stokers since the majority of Royal Navy ships at this time still relied on coal as the major source of their power.

(Right: HMS ‘Victory’ is seen here in dry dock in the southern English naval port-city of Portsmouth where she has been since the late 1920s – photograph from Wikipedia)



In fact, it appears that Seaman Whelan, although on the books of *Victory II*, was now to serve for fourteen days on HMS *Narcissus*, a requisitioned and hired yacht. She had only been in war-time service since mid-January of that 1915.



(Right above: A of six-hundred sixty tons, ‘Narcissus’ had been built in 1905 for a private owner who was a member of the elite Royal Yacht Squadron sailing out of Cowes. Taken over by the Admiralty in late 1914, she was re-fitted for work with the war-time Auxiliary Patrol and thus armed with two twelve-pounder naval guns. She may have served not only in ‘home waters’ but also in the Mediterranean Sea during the conflict – which she survived. Serving once again during the Second World War as HMS ‘Grive’ she was sunk during the evacuation of the BEF and French troops from Dunkirk.

Today she lies on the bottom just outside the harbour mouth of that above-said French port. – The image of the yacht *Narcissus* is from the <http://dkpaves.free.fr/html/grivrhtm> web-site via the <http://www.willkemp.com> web-site.)

(Right: A 12-pounder – the weight of the shell – naval weapon as installed on the requisitioned yacht *HMS 'Narcissus'*. This example, adapted for use during the Second World War, is seen here in the year 2010 at 'Firepower', the Royal Artillery Museum, which has unfortunately recently been closed.)



As he was to serve on *Narcissus* for but two weeks, and as the ship was only just coming into her war-time service, it is not sure that Seaman Whelan was ever to put to sea on board her at this time or to serve her guns.

On March 14, 1915, he left service on *Narcissus* to join a second requisitioned steam-yacht, *HMS Valiant II*, this vessel, while three times larger and carrying twice the armament of *Narcissus* – perhaps also equipped with wireless - was also engaged with the Auxiliary Patrol and was at the time in the waters around the British Isles. While his scant Service Record notes that he was to be attached to her from March 15, 1915, until the last day of May of the same year, it does not document exactly what his duties might have entailed.

On June 1 Seaman Whelan was transferred for a single day – thus his move was surely on paper only – to *HMS Sabrina* (see further below) which had by then apparently become the parent-ship to the above-mentioned *HMS Narcissus* which in fact was to be the ship on which he was to set foot.

On the following day, June 2, *Narcissus* was to become the responsibility of *HMS Cormorant*, the name of the harbour-service and base ship at Gibraltar, British naval fortress, dock-yard and gateway to the Mediterranean Sea. However, the date on which Seaman Whelan was to report to this last-named posting is far from clear – and it is unlikely that he was to sail as a crew member to Gibraltar on *Narcissus*.

There were at or about this time two hired fishing-vessels on the Royal Navy's books named '*Cormorant*' but they were also numbered: '*Cormorant III*' and '*Cormorant IV*'; the enumeration made to avoid any problems of identification. But there was a third vessel, the un-numbered '*Cormorant*', the harbour-service and base-ship stationed at the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea: at Gibraltar.



***'*Cormorant IV*' was also to serve as '*Nadine*', a Q-ship - a decoy-vessel to entrap enemy submarines.**

Seaman Hall's *Cormorant* not being numbered, the one last-listed above is surely the one where he was to serve during that summer and autumn of 1915...except that all the other shore-based facilities – barracks, armouries, dock-yards etc. – were also a part of *HMS Cormorant*, and thus he may never have set foot on the ship itself. And as his Service

Record shows, he is documented as having been again at some point attached to HMS *Narcissus*.

(Preceding page: *The image of HMS ‘Cormorant’ is from Wikipedia. She was one of five such vessels built for the Royal Navy and commissioned in and about 1878 for use in the surveillance of Britain’s numerous trade routes. Stationed as far afield as Australia, the Pacific and Canada’s west coast, in 1889 she was ordered to Gibraltar to play several roles for the next sixty years, until 1949 when ultimately scrapped.*)

(Right below: *The British Crown Colony of Gibraltar in pre-Great War days: The Spanish mainland is in the background beyond the harbour and Royal Navy dockyard. – from a vintage postcard*)

As ever, there appears to be no record of Seaman Whelan’s duties on board *Narcissus* – or elsewhere except that his early training as a gunner at HMS *Excellent* should not be forgotten - at Gibraltar, and after just more than twenty-three weeks attached to the base there he was back – or soon to be back - in England, on November 14 recorded as on the nominal roll of a Naval shore-based establishment with which he was already familiar, HMS *Victory*, there to await a further posting...or perhaps a month-long period of furlough back home to Newfoundland*.



**Having by that time served on overseas service for almost two full years, Seaman Whelan was undoubtedly eligible for a period of leave. However, a great deal of research has failed to uncover any evidence of his having travelled home - yet this does not preclude his having done so.*

It would appear that some ten months were then to pass attached to HMS *Victory* before there came a further summons to a posting on a ship. On October 3 of 1918 seaman Whelan was transferred the Principality of Wales, to the Royal Navy Base at Milford Haven. From there His Majesty’s Ships were able to patrol and sweep the so-called *Western Approaches* to the English Channel and Irish Sea.



(Right: *Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the War: these were for the most part contact mines. U-boats were also used for this purpose – from NavWeaps web-site*)

Before mid-1916 the base and facilities at Milford Haven had been assigned the name of the harbour-service and base ship stationed there, HMS *Sabrina*, a name seen on a previous page of this dossier. By the time of Seaman Whelan’s service there in 1918 *Sabrina* had been replaced by HMS *Idaho*, the vessel then commanding the flotilla of smaller craft operating out of the harbour.

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At *Idaho* he became a member of the complement for a *Kil-class* patrol gunboat. Some of these new ships, constructed as of July, 1917 – apparently built with a double-ended shape to confuse the enemy – were fitted so as to be employed as mine-sweepers. Such was the case of HMS *Kildwick* on which Seaman Whelan was to serve.

(Right below: *The above photograph of the ‘Kil-Class’ patrol gunboat HMS ‘Kildorrey’ in war-time Naval dazzle-painting is from the greatwarforum.org web-site.*)

Only thirty-nine days after Seaman Whelan had joined *Idaho* and *Kildwick*, the armistice of November 11, 1918, came into effect and the hostilities ceased. However, the seas surrounding Britain’s coasts remained littered with mines both German and British, weapons that were still potentially dangerous and whose whereabouts were often uncharted.



There was still to be plenty of work for the mine-sweepers and their crews, some of whom were yet to be victims of a war that was no longer being fought*.

**Several were Naval Reservists from Newfoundland who were still manning these ships.*

On New Year’s Day of 1919, HMS *Kildwick* was transferred from *Idaho* at Milford Haven to HMS *Actaeon* of which at the time there were two in service. Both were elderly vessels and both were serving as harbour-service ships and as Royal Navy torpedo schools, one at Portsmouth and the other in the port of Sheerness on the River Thames.

Despite her re-stationing from Wales, the task of HMS *Kildwick*, whether at Portsmouth or Sheerness, was to remain much the same and Seaman Whelan was to remain in her service from that January 1 until March 21 - eleven weeks and a day in all - before he was transferred to *Vivid II*, the Royal Navy shore-based facility at Plymouth-Devonport.

It may be that by this time he was exhibiting the symptoms of the disease – tuberculosis - which was to take his life less than a year later and it had been decided that he be invalided back to Newfoundland for treatment.

The details of his return home are a little confused, one source casting doubt on whether in fact the person documented was in fact Seaman Thomas Joseph Whelan. However *Ancestry.ca* cites that he was to sail from the Scottish port-city of Glasgow on March 31, 1919, on board the SS *Saturnia* in the company of returning Canadian military personnel, to disembark in Saint John, New Brunswick*, on April 10. There are no details as to how he was then to make his way back to Newfoundland.



(Right above: *The image of the SS ‘Saturnia’, from a vintage post-card, is from the greatships.net web-site.*)

**In fact, Ancestry.ca cites his disembarkation on April 10 as St. John's Newfoundland, but the ship's papers show the ship arriving on that date in New Brunswick. There appear to be nothing else to confirm or to contradict this information.*

On May 14, 1919, Seaman Whelan was recorded as having reported back *to duty* on HMS *Briton* in St. John's. There he was apparently to serve for seven weeks before being discharged from service, almost certainly for medical reasons, on July 2. Whether or not he was at this time to enter a medical facility to counter his pulmonary tuberculosis appears not to have been recorded.

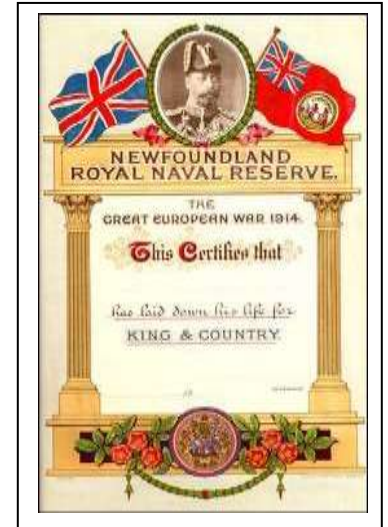
The son of James Whelan, fisherman, and of Ellen Whelan (née *Norman*) of Mussel Harbour, perhaps before Red Island, he was also brother to older sister Elizabeth.

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

Seaman Thomas Joseph Whalen died on January 20, 1920, in military medical facilities in St. John's at the age of twenty-seven years: date of birth at Mussell Harbour, Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, May 9 of 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register and confirmed by Naval Records).

Seaman Whalen 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 Thomas Joseph Whalen was entitled to the British War Medal (left) 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.