



Some of the graves of the victims of the sinking of the *Laurentic* in the cemetery of St. Mura, Church of the Holy Trinity, St. Mura, Newfoundland.

Having decided to answer the call of the authorities for volunteers, fisherman Arthur Edward White thereupon travelled from Snarep Cove in the District of St. George on the west coast of the island, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on December 4 of 1914, he reported...to duty...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

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On that same day of early December he enlisted into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's war-time service* and underwent a satisfactory medical assessment on the morrow. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.



(Right: *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.*



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(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)*

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.

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.



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

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

Two weeks less a day* after having first reported to *Calypso* in St. John's, on December 17-18 – at this point having been promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit* – the now-Seaman White 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

**It appears that in many cases, even if the recruit in question had not already previously been with the Royal Naval Reserve, the required twenty-eight day training period, all or partially, was oft-times waived.*

(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 White'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 White, the destination was to be HMS *Victory I**, the Royal Navy port and facilities of Plymouth-Devonport at almost the other end of the country.

**The Royal Navy had a disciplinary system which in certain ways differed from civil – and even Army – law; but for it to be employed, a sailor had to be attached to a ship. While at sea, of course, this posed no problem, but when a sailor was performing duties on land that were not associated directly to a particular ship he still had to be held accountable for any untoward behaviour.*

The Navy's training establishments were for the most part on land: Devonport (although apparently it was only a shore-base during the Great War), Chatham, and Portsmouth for example, were land bases for many thousands of naval personnel, some of who were permanently stationed there. Thus the practice became to base an elderly or even obsolete ship in the nearby port to be, nominally, the vessel to which this personnel was to be attached. This appears to have been the procedure for the large number of shore bases organized around the coast of the United Kingdom during the Great War.



(Right above: 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)

Thus, HMS ‘Victory’, the base to which Seaman White had been ordered after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on shore, but also HMS ‘Victory’ the warship, the vessel from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although the ship’s illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.

It was also the name which all the sailors attached to HMS ‘Victory’ were to have emblazoned on the bands of their afore-mentioned caps.

Furthermore, these establishments were at times divided into sections: ‘Victory I’ was where personnel (as opposed to the engine-room personnel, for example, in ‘Victory II’) such as Seaman White were to be stationed while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships.

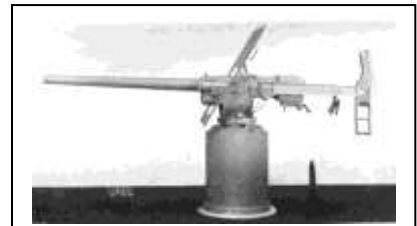
Seaman White was to serve at *Victory I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until May 12 of the following year, 1915. He was thereupon transferred to *Victory II* which suggests that he was to receive at least a certain amount of training pertaining to the mechanics and propulsion of a vessel – although it would also appear that he was there for the brief period of but a single week.

That single week may have been spent on board an armed drifter or trawler whose identity has been difficult to ascertain. It may have been HMT *Ben Gulvain*, a vessel registered in the Scottish port of Aberdeen and which had been hired, converted and armed with a quick-firing six-pounder gun before having been ordered into war-time service as a mine-sweeper in March of 1915.



(Right above: *Armed drifters entering Yarmouth Harbour after a mine-sweeping operation – photograph from Fishermen in WW1 on the Fishing News web-site)*

(Right: *A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss 6 pounder gun such as would had been mounted on the fore-deck of the trawler Ben Gulvain – from Wikipedia)*



(Right: *Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the Great War: these were for the most part contact mines. – from the NavWeaps web-site)*



Seaman White’s subsequent posting was to HMS *Attentive III*, the base and depot ship at Dover from where the majority of vessels of the *Dover Patrol* were stationed. He was officially documented as *on strength* there on May 21, 1915.

***The coastal town of Dover lies on that part of the English coast which lies closest to France and the port-town of Calais. The Dover Straits, some thirty kilometres wide, allow vessels from the Baltic sea, from northern Europe and from the North Sea to have access**

to the English Channel – or La Manche as the French call it – and from there the Atlantic Ocean. Today it is the world’s second busiest waterway – and it was already critical to British interests at the time of the Great War.

Even some seventy years prior to that conflict the British had seen fit in the mid-nineteenth century to construct a harbour for commercial, for cross-Channel and for naval reasons. The port of Dover today is the main maritime link between the United Kingdom and the continent – and the more recently-constructed ‘Chunnel’ (Channel Tunnel) passes almost directly underneath it.



(Right: One of the entrances to the port of Dover as seen from the Dover Straits with, flanking it to the right, the well-known ‘White Cliffs’ – photograph from 2010)

With the Germans having occupied a part of the Belgian coast almost opposite Dover and with a goodly number of British vessels, both commercial and naval – to which should be added the troop transports which from there and from nearby Folkestone were, by the end of the War, to have carried some five million troops across to the Western Front – using the aforementioned waterway, the British created the ‘Dover Patrol’.



The biggest fear was that the Germans would employ U-boats and torpedo-boats based on the Belgian coast to attack British shipping, and would also set mines in those waters. In fact they did although it was the mines that were to become the greatest threat to shipping.

Thus began the ‘Dover Patrol’. In its early days it was a motley collection of old, even obsolete war-ships, for the most part destroyers, to which was very soon to be added a number of requisitioned and purpose-built small vessels, notably fishing-boats, trawlers and drifters, lightly-armed but capable of mine-sweeping and keeping their German opposite numbers at bay.

(Right above: Armed trawlers of the ‘Dover Patrol’ in the harbour at Dover – The undated photograph is from the ‘Imperial War Museum’ web-site.)

The ‘Dover Patrol’ rapidly became a large and important entity of Britain’s naval defences and vessels from it were to be stationed not only at Dover but at other points around the nearby coast*. Its base came to be known as HMS ‘Attentive’.



***HMS ‘Ceto’ was another facility at nearby Ramsgate where several Newfoundlanders serving in ships of the ‘Dover Patrol’ were based.**

(Preceding page: *HMS 'Attentive', seen here at some time prior to the Great War during which she served as a cruiser of the 'Dover Patrol'. The base reportedly was named after she became the parent ship because her Commanding Officer was to become senior officer of the 'Dover Patrol' itself.* – photograph from *Wikipedia*)

The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with *HMS Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base's parent ship* and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser – or the also above-mentioned trawler *Seaward Ho* cited in other sources - to which Seaman White was to be attached in that month of May of 1915 – although all of this is perhaps unnecessarily complicated for the telling of Seaman White's story

What exactly were to be Seaman White's duties while at *Attentive III* has not been made clear by his sparse Service Records or whether he was even employed on the above-mentioned cruiser or at one of the attached land-based facilities. It is only recorded that on July 1 of that same year of 1915 he was posted to serve on board the naval vessel *St. George* where he was to remain for more than four months, until November 15.

But then a further complication for the historian is that at the time there were two vessels by the name of *St. George* employed at the time in the service of His Majesty.

One was an ex-1st class cruiser of the *Edgar Class* built in 1892, a ship of almost eight-thousand tons armed with four six-inch and eight twelve-pounder guns. She had soon become obsolete and by 1910 had been converted for use as a depot ship.

By the spring of 1915 she was being used as such by the *Humber Patrol* of mainly smaller craft and was tied up in the port of Immingham in north-east England where she was preparing to play the same role in the eastern Mediterranean later that year in support of the ongoing Dardanelles (*Gallipoli*) Campaign.



(Right above: *The photograph of the cruiser HMS St. George is from the navalhistory.net web-site.*)

The other possibility is a little more vague: a hired...*composite Auxiliary Steamer 3 masted Schooner*...powered by both sail and motor and categorized as a *Special Service Vessel*. Built in 1890 and weighing some six-hundred forty tons, she was to be equipped with a single three-pounder gun and wireless equipment and would come into naval service in March of 1915.

Alas! – there is no record of where the ship was stationed during the war-time period other than the vague...*May have had an Auxiliary Patrol role as a wireless-equipped Auxiliary Patrol Group Leader or in special yacht squadrons at home or in Mediterranean* (from *navalhistory.net*).



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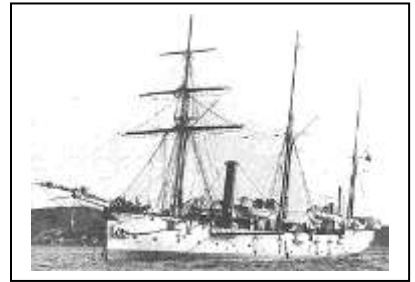
(Preceding page: *The photograph of St. George - from the archives of the Royal Yacht Squadron - is from the titanicofficers.com web-site*)

However, if either of the aforesaid vessels was the vessel on which he was to serve, it would seem that no untoward incidents were experienced by either ship during the period of Seaman White's attachment. He would have passed a quiet four months.

Thus on November 16, 1915, Seaman White was once again on the nominal roll of HMS *Victory* (in fact *Victory I*) where he was now to languish for some six months, until June 3-4 of the following year, 1916, until his next posting which was adjacent to the Portsmouth dock-yards and to the venerable HMS *Victory* herself.

HMS *Magpie* was an elderly craft, a gunboat launched in 1889. In August of 1914, at the onset of the *Great War*, she was to be employed as a boom defence vessel on the River Solent which flows in front of the port-city of Portsmouth before emptying into the English Channel. It was therefore a body of water of strategic importance to the Royal Navy.

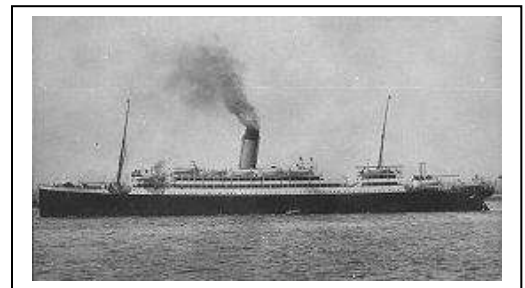
Seaman White was attached to *Magpie*, perhaps or perhaps not to the ship itself as she was to become a depot ship only in October of that 1915. This meant that she was to be responsible – administration, supplies and fueling, personnel, pay etc. - for several smaller vessels, usually hired, bought or requisitioned fishing-vessels, which were employed locally for coastal defence. HMS *Magpie* would also have been the overseer – and the name - of any facilities on land attached to the operation.



(Right above: *The Redbreast-Class gunboat, HMS 'Sparrow', armed with six four-inch guns, was a sister-ship of 'Magpie'. – the photograph is from Wikipedia*)

Daily routines, both on shore or perhaps on the depot ship, may well have been the only activities undertaken by Seaman White during the remainder of that year of 1916, as his records do not show him as having been attached to any of the smaller ships that were the responsibility of HMS *Magpie*.

While Seaman White was serving the final days of the year 1916 at HMS *Magpie**, the naval authorities had been deciding that his time in service since 1914 was deserving of a month's furlough back in Newfoundland. He was thus assigned trans-Atlantic passage on an armed merchant cruiser, HMS *Laurentic*.



He was not to travel alone. A number of other Newfoundland naval reservists, having also by this time been deemed worthy of a month's leave at home, were to travel – likely as far as Halifax or Québec – on her.

(Right above: *The photograph of 'Laurentic', likely seen here in peace-time as no guns are visible on her decks, is from the Naval-History.net web-site*)

****Although his Service Record documents him as still serving with HMS 'Magpie' until January 25, several of the preceding days must have involved preparation and the subsequent train journey from southern England to the port of departure in the north-west (and see below).***

Seaman White was to report to *Laurentic* directly from *Magpie*. The ship was to sail from Birkenhead, a port adjacent to Liverpool, on January 23 of 1917 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which to buy munitions in North America.

****While it is recorded that 'Laurentic' was carrying no passengers or troops, it should be remembered that some of those on board were returning home for leave or for repatriation.***

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in Lough (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) Swilly to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o'clock on that same afternoon *Laurentic* was under way again.

She then passed through the protective boom at the entrance to Lough Swilly and gathered speed – it was apparently for her speed that she had been chosen to carry the gold as she could out-run most ships and any U-boat. She was barely three kilometres from the coast when she struck two German mines in quick succession and rapidly began to sink; nor after the second explosion was there any power and thus no distress signal could be sent.



There was little time to lower the life-boats although apparently all on board *Laurentic*, apart from perhaps some engine-room personnel who were already dead, were able to board them. It was to do them little good.



A snow-storm was blowing and most of the men were not clothed to resist it. Any help had to travel the length of the Lough and then through open seas to reach them. Apparently the nearest land could only be reached in the teeth of the gale that was blowing, a wind reckoned to be at minus twelve degrees, and the boats were filling with water.

And those that eventually managed to land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, un-inhabited coast of Donegal.

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(Previous page: *The Memorial to those who perished on that January 25 of 1916 during the sinking of HMS 'Laurentic'; and the churchyard of St. Mura of the Church of Ireland at Upper Fahan, Ireland, wherein stands the aforesaid Memorial and where many of the dead lie to this day – photographs from 2011*)

(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*)

Little wonder, perhaps, that of the four-hundred seventy-five on board *Laurentic*, three-hundred fifty-four were to die.

The son of George White and of Ellen (also found as *Nellie*) White of Shalop Cove, a part of the community of St. George in the District of the same name, he was also brother to Joseph, Ralph, Mary-L, Martin, Jane and to Isadore.

Seaman White was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty-seven years: date of birth at St. George, Newfoundland, July 14, 1890 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register with the month and year both confirmed in the 1911 Census).

Seaman White 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 Arthur Edward White was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to 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.