



Seaman Eric Gordon (found in a single source as *Jordan*) Woodford, Number 2061x, lies in Pembroke Dock (*Llanion*) Cemetery in the Principality of Wales.

Having answered the call to volunteer from the naval authorities, he thereupon relinquished his occupation, likely that of fisherman in Herring Neck, District of Twillingate, and travelled to the capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on April 9 of 1916, he reported...*to duty*...*on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton* (ex-*Calypso*), moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same April 9 he enlisted into the Reserve, was signed on to serve for the...*duration of the conflict** and also underwent the required medical assessment. Eric Gordon Woodford also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

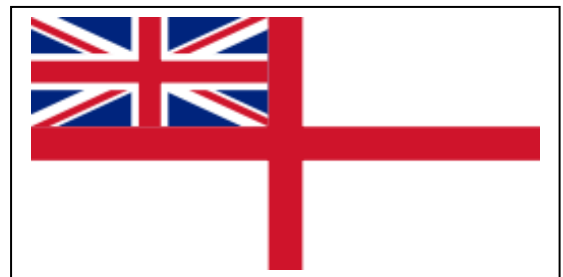


(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior 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' (later 'Briton') 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 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.. – 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 in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

Seaman Woodford's scant personal file documents him leaving for service overseas on or about April 23-24, 1916, only fourteen days* following the formalities of enlistment and

they also have him promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit* on an unrecorded date during this same period.

**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 waived by 'Royal Proclamation'.*

The records show that Seaman Woodford was struck off the books of HMS *Briton* by the above-mentioned April 23 of that 1916 and transferred to the nominal roll of *Vivid I* (see below) on the following day, April 24, even while in Newfoundland – or its waters. Thus a certain number of the days attached to *Vivid I* were not spent at all at *Vivid* but on a ship crossing the Atlantic from Newfoundland to the United Kingdom.



That ship was the SS *Pretorian*, an *Allan Line* ship – the Company, if not the vessel itself, well-known in St. John's – which since 1904 had been running the commercial route between Glasgow and the Canadian ports of Québec and Montréal, and had perhaps deviated from it to embark the naval reservist draft on this occasion. The vessel sailed from St. John's en route to the United Kingdom on or about that April 23, 1916.

(Right above: This un-dated photograph of the Allan Line ship SS 'Pretorian' in the Prince's Dock in the Scottish City of Glasgow is from the web-site 'Tangled Roots and Trees' in which it is shown by courtesy of the Graham Lappin Collection.)

If the experience of previous Reservists was then repeated, once the draft with which Seaman Woodford was to travel had landed in the United Kingdom – was it in Glasgow? - several of the men would have been posted directly to a ship. Others would have been ordered to undergo further training – or simply to wait - at various Royal Navy establishments mostly around the coast of southern England and thus, likely having journeyed by train, they likely reported to these bases on or about May 2 or 3.

As seen above, Seaman Woodford's destination was to be HMS *Vivid I**, a Division of the Royal Navy port and facilities at Plymouth-Devonport on the south coast of England and almost at the other end of the country from Glasgow.

**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 only a shore base and a holding-barracks for seamen awaiting postings during the Great War), Chatham, and Portsmouth for example, were terrestrial facilities 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.

HMS 'Vivid', the base to which Seaman Woodford had been ordered after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on shore, but also a small, elderly, nondescript depot ship (originally HMS 'Cukoo', built 1873), to which all the naval personnel was attached and was the name to be emblazoned on the bands of their cap.

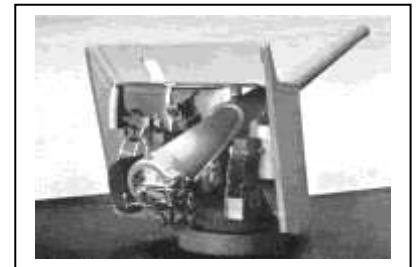
These establishments were at times divided into sections: the holding barracks at 'Vivid I' was where the seamen (as opposed to engine-room personnel, for example, who were sent to 'Vivid II') such as Seaman Woodford were likely initially to be stationed – as well as potential signallers and telegraphers - while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.



(Right above: The main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport – photograph from 2011(?))

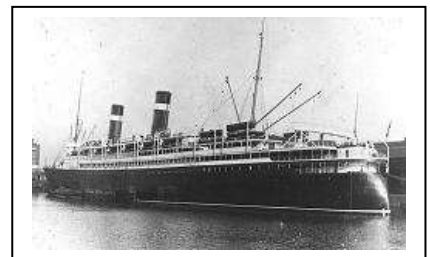
After a delay of one-hundred thirty-eight days which he served at *Vivid I* – this including the time spent traversing the Atlantic - Seaman Woodford is recorded as dispatched on September 9 – although it may have been as late as September 13, suggested by the ship's log-books - of that same year to Liverpool to serve on the armed merchant cruiser *HMS Alsatian* for fifteen weeks.

The *SS Alsatian* was an *Allan Line* ship of eighteen and a half-thousand tons which had been built in 1913 for the trans-Atlantic service. She was requisitioned by the British Admiralty during the early days of the *Great War*, to be refitted and also armed with eight 4.7-inch guns (later amended to eight six-inch weapons as well as an additional pair of six-pounder quick-firing pieces for anti-aircraft work) before entering war-time service with the 10th Cruiser Squadron (also known as the *Northern Patrol*).



(Right above: An example of the naval gun with which Clan McNaughton had been equipped prior to sailing on her war-time duties. – from Wikipedia)

The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling – and certainly not prepared - 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 encompasses by Ireland, northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.



(Right above: The image of a peace-time 'Alsatian' is from the naval-history.net web-site.)

Seaman Woodford was to serve with HMS *Alsatian* on two patrols, his three months and two sorties on board the vessel starting in the north-western English port-city of Liverpool and ending in the wind-swept Shetland Islands (see below).

There appears to be have been nothing out of the ordinary recorded in the ship's log-books during this period although the northern waters which the *Northern Patrol* had under surveillance appears to have been a busy place. *Alsatian* was to be in contact with sixty-nine Royal Navy vessels (some on several occasions), thirty-six British commercial or fishing ships which were physically checked, and twenty-nine foreign ones which were not only checked, but a small minority sent with a military guard on board to a British port for further inspection.

To allow the armed merchant cruisers of the *Northern Patrol* to spend more time in their watery positions, coaling stations – most British ships of the time, commercial and military, were only just beginning to convert to oil – were eventually established in the Shetland Islands at Swarbucks Minn and Busta Voe. Apart from two weeks less a day spent in Liverpool during the month of November, 1916, these two aforesaid coaling stations represented the only land seen for a few brief days by Seaman Woodford from September 14 until December 22 when he was recorded – on December 24, 1916 – as no longer serving on *Alsatian*.

How it was that Seaman Woodford was then to make his way back to the south coast of England is not documented, nor are there any clues afforded by the sparse records in his file*. All that is found is that he was back...*on strength*...at *Vivid I* from December 25, Christmas Day, of 1916 until April 25, four months later although some of that time he was surely *on strength* only on paper and not in barracks at Plymouth-Devonport.

**Possibly on a collier.*

On or about that April 25 he was on his way to the Principality of Wales, having been ordered transferred to the British Naval Base at Milford Haven which since mid-1916 had been designated as *Idaho III**.

**'Idaho III' is found in Seaman Woodford's records but not in those of the Royal Navy. However, there was an 'Idaho' at 'The Haven', and perhaps we may presume that this is both the vessel and base referred to in his papers since he and 'Idaho' are from now on recorded as being in the same place.*

HMS 'Idaho' was a requisitioned steam yacht armed with a single one-pounder quick-firing gun and which was used after 1916 at Milford Haven during the Great War as a local patrol vessel and apparently later as a tug-boat.

Idaho's role was also to act as a base ship, to be responsible for the personnel, the arming, fuelling, provisioning, maintenance as well as the finances of a flotilla of smaller boats, usually trawlers and drifters and the such-like which operated out of the Haven.

Perhaps it was for service on one of these smaller craft that Seaman Woodford was sent to Milford Haven - other Newfoundlanders were.

(Right: *HM Trawler 'Apley' based in Milford Haven in 1918, the year during which she was mined and sank on December 6, 1917, although the Canadian Virtual War Memorial (Veterans' Affairs Canada) says January, 1918. The crew perished including a single Canadian seaman, but no Newfoundlanders were on board. – from the Canadian War Memorial (Veterans' Affairs Canada) via Google).*



For how long Seaman Woodford had been serving at or on *Idaho* before he was diagnosed as suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis is not recorded, but he seems not to have been posted while there to any other ship operating out of Milford Haven. He was eventually admitted into the Royal Naval Hospital at Pembroke Dock.

The son of Timothy Woodford and of Lucy Woodford (née *Philpott**) of Herring Neck, Twillingate, he was also brother of Irene-Florence, Abraham, Mahaleth-Lilian (sic), George-Seymour, Augustus-Selwyn, Rhoda-Mathilda and to Timothy-P..

(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*)

**The couple had married on November 7, 1881, in the community of Herring Neck.*

Seaman Eric Gordon Woodford was reported as having...*died of illness...in the Royal Naval Hospital at Pembroke Dock on June 28, 1917, at the reported age of twenty-one years: date of birth in Herring Neck, Newfoundland, June 13, 1896 (from his enlistment papers as is the name Jordan).*



Seaman Woodford 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 Eric Gordon Woodford was entitled to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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.