

DICKER, S.

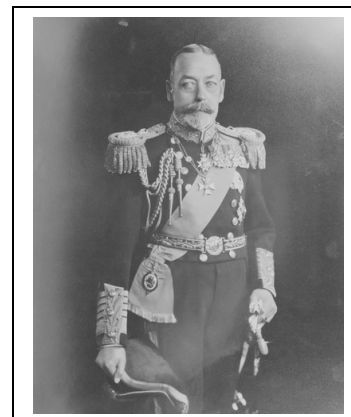


Seaman Stephen Dicker, Number 1240x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

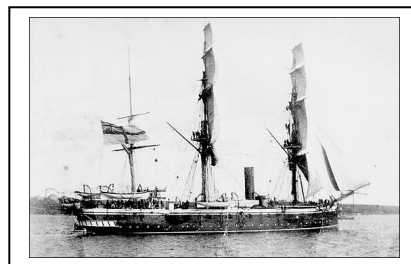
Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Stephen Dicker relinquished his occupation, likely that of a fisherman, working out of the Flat Islands, Bonavista Bay, and travelled to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on October 20 of 1914, he reported...to duty...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same October 20 he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's* war-time service and also underwent a satisfactory medical examination. 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.*

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.

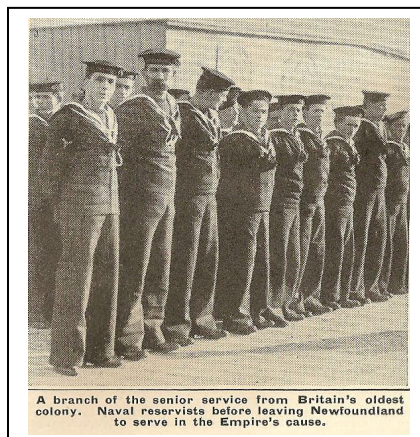


Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it 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)

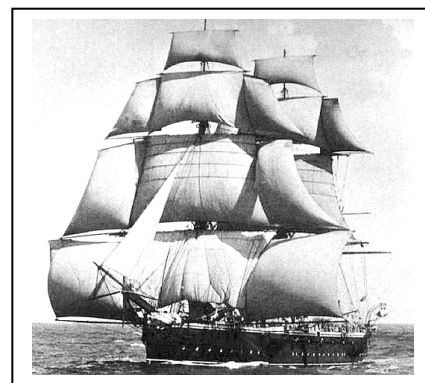
Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.

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)

Following those afore-mentioned sixteen days of training and service* spent in St. John's, Seaman Dicker, 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 vessel *Franconia*, arrived in St. John's from New York.

(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. She was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – the photograph is from Wikipedia)



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**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'.*

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.

Seaman Dicker was to report to HMS *Pembroke**, the naval establishment at Chatham on the River Medway, itself a tributary of the better-known River Thames, and in the county of Kent. Not only was it a barracks – it operated from 1878 until 1983 – but it was the name given to a number of training establishments, mostly not far-removed from Chatham, which were numbered according to the purpose of the training – or otherwise - involved.

Pembroke I was the Division of the base for regular seamen and it was likely the holding-barracks of *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Dicker would have been attached, there to await a posting to His Majesty's ships.

**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.



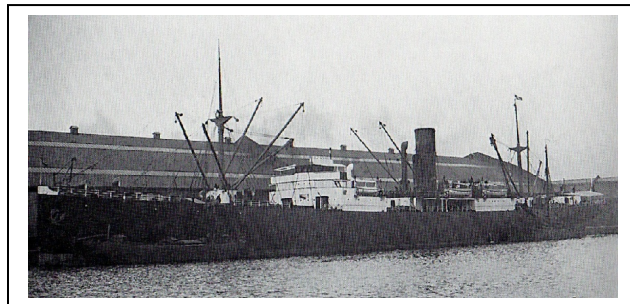
Which is why Seaman Dicker would have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' cap-band – until he joined 'Clan McNaughton'.

(Right above: 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)

The ship to which Seaman Decker was *officially* transferred on December 10-11 of that same 1914 was HMS *Clan McNaughton*, reportedly at Liverpool on December 4, likely the port from where she was to sail on patrol with the 10th Cruiser Squadron some days before that Christmas.

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(Right: *The image of Clan MacNaughton – with unfortunately no further details - is from the Royal Marines History.com web-site.)*

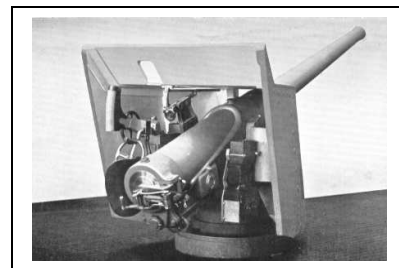


The vessel, a passenger-cargo ship of the *Clan Line*, had been requisitioned and hired by the British Admiralty on November 19 of that autumn and had been fitted out with eight 4.7 inch naval guns for the purpose of serving as an armed merchant cruiser.

But although a number of Newfoundland reservists had been sent upon arrival in the United Kingdom to train at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy's gunnery school, Seaman Dicker had not been among them and he was posted to *Clan McNaughton* to likely serve as an ordinary seaman.

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

Clan McNaughton 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–cargo ships carrying a few elderly guns at times as old as some of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.

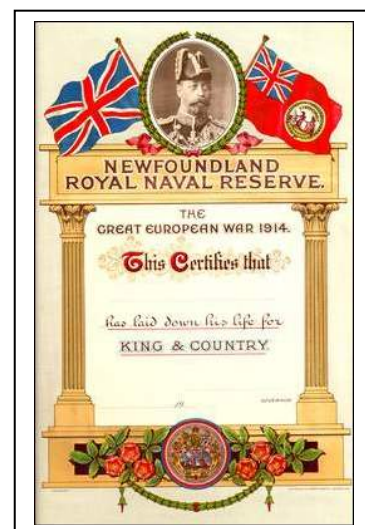


The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling – and certainly not prepared - for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this these vessels had to patrol the area of stormy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

To that end, the following is an excerpt from a letter to home written by Seaman Stephen Dicker: *I am one of a gun's crew and have to stand my watch on the foc's'sle no matter how the water is going over her, with a pair of short lace-up boots on. This were as many as twenty days...that I never has a dry foot...*

Even so, the first several weeks of her service appear to have been uneventful and *Clan McNaughton* apparently was to return to Liverpool on one if not two occasions before setting out to sea once again on what was to be her last voyage*.

**It appears not to be recorded whether she was in the company of 'Viknor' when that vessel left the Squadron to return to Liverpool in mid-January, not to be seen again before her discovery on the ocean floor almost a century later.*



The weather during that part of the winter of 1914-1915 was apparently foul and the last message from *Clan McNaughton*, sent by radio by her captain on February 3, was that the ship – on patrol off the north coast of Ireland and west of the Hebrides - was in...*terrible weather*.

She was not heard from again.

(Preceding page: *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 cause of her loss has never been ascertained: she may simply have been the victim of the weather as reported by her captain; or perhaps, as originally thought, she had encountered a German mine although apparently the vessel was not particularly close to a mine-field.

A third theory suggests a combination of circumstances: the weather; perhaps a top-heavy ship because of the eight naval guns that she was carrying (just more than two tons per gun) and relatively-empty holds; to which was to be added an inexperienced crew - all may have contributed to her loss.



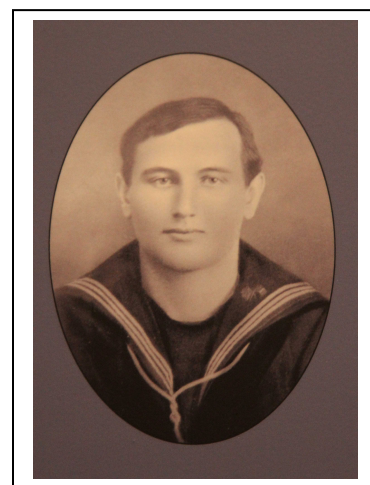
(Right above: *The sacrifice of Stephen Dicker is honoured on the Eastport Peninsula War Memorial which had originally stood on Flat Island – photograph from 2013*)

The son of George Dicker (also found as *Decker*) fisherman and of Jane Dicker (née *Ralph**), of the community of Flat Island, Bonavista Bay, Seaman Dicker was also brother to Lilly (*Beatrice*), to Ralph, to Wilfred** and to Isaac.

**The couple was to be married on the Flat Islands, Bonavista Bay, on November 11, 1888.*

Stephen Dicker died on February 3 of 1915 at the *reported* age of twenty-two years: date of birth on the Flat Islands, Bonavista Bay, March 6, 1893 (from Salvage Parish Records) but also March 3 of 1891 (from Royal Navy Records).

(Right: *The photograph of Seaman Dicker is from the Virtual War Memorial, Veteran's Affairs, Canada web-site and from Newfoundland Provincial Archives*).



Seaman Dicker 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.

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Seaman Stephen Dicker was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



*****His brother Wilfred was to enlist in Toronto into the 228th Infantry Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force on December 8 of 1916. Assigned the Service Number 1007086, he was discharged from service some seven weeks later, on January 28, 1917, for 'inefficiency'.***

He was never to travel overseas.

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 22, 2023.