



Seaman-Gunner John Fowlow, Number 688x, 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), John Fowlow had initially presented himself for enlistment on March 21 of 1908, whereupon he was to undergo a twenty-eight day period of training which terminated a month later on April 17.

The majority of pre-War volunteers had joined-up for a period of five years, in John Fowlow's case, he was to serve intermittently in the Naval Reserve until the events of the summer of 1914 dictated that he was to go to war. In fact he was apparently to undergo six periods of training – five only were requisite - the final one of which was to come about during the months of January and February of 1913.

Despite having been a Reservist since 1908, John Fowlow was not to be summoned from home *to service* until ninety-nine days had passed following the British *Declaration of War*. He then travelled from his family residence at Trinity North Side to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on November 11 of 1914 he was again to report...*to duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).



On that above-mentioned mid-autumn day, John Fowlow 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 in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site, taken in or about 1935.*)

**At the outset 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.*

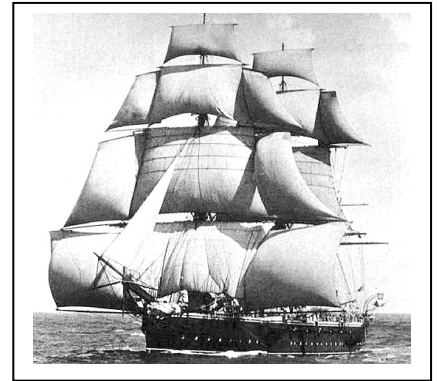
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion 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 at a minimum.

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.

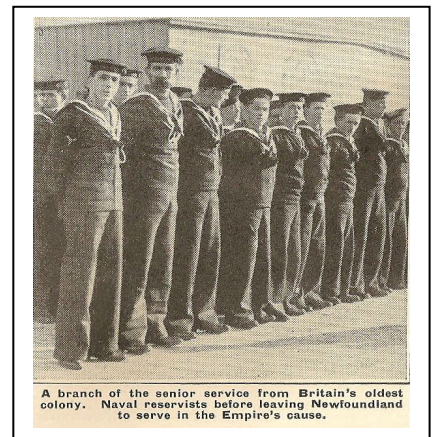
Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.

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.



(Right: H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – photograph by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

(Right: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from *The War Illustrated*)



Following a mere seven days of duties and perhaps training* in St. John's, Seaman Fowlow, one of a draft of one-hundred forty-nine Naval Reservists, embarked on November 18-19 onto the *Allan Line* ocean-liner *Carthaginian* which was apparently returning on its commercial route from Philadelphia(?) to Glasgow and thereupon took the draft on board in Newfoundland. She sailed at nine o'clock in the evening of the 19th, its reservist passengers un-mentioned in the local newspapers.

(Right: A relatively elderly vessel, 'Carthaginian' had been launched in October of 1884. She apparently remained un-requisitioned as a troop transport during the conflict although this did not prevent her from being sunk by a mine laid by a U-boat off the Irish coast on June 14 of 1917 – happily without any loss of life it may be added. – the undated photograph of *Carthaginian* entering St. John's harbour has been donated to the *Maritime History Archive* web-site by Captain Harry Stone.)



***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.**

Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom it appears that while some few of the men were posted directly to a ship, the majority was ordered directly to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about November 28-29.

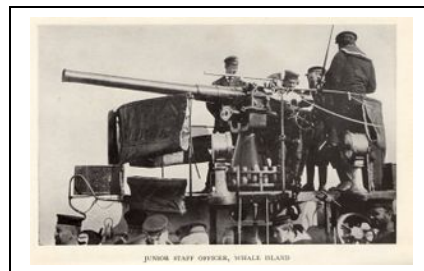
(continued)

Seaman Fowlow was not immediately dispatched to a ship, although he was to remain at his first posting in the United Kingdom for only some seven weeks: Until on or about the second week of January of the New Year, 1917, he was to be in training at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy gunnery school located on Whale Island at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth. He was to train there until January 11 when he was ordered to join a British Naval Base and ship: HMS *Zaria*.



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

(Right: *Drill on a naval gun on Whale Island during the period of the ‘Great War’ – from Wikipedia*)

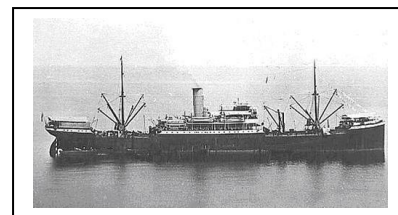


By the time of Seaman Fowlow’s attachment to her, the ship HMS *Zaria* was stationed in the Auxiliary Patrol Base at Longhope in the Orkney Islands – in the vicinity of *Scapa Flow*, principal harbour of the British Grand Fleet.

The vessel *Zaria* had been launched at the end of the year 1903 for the *British and African Steam Navigation Company* of Liverpool. In the years prior to the *Great War* she had sailed on routes to and from the *Canary Islands*, *West Africa* and the *West Indies* but in Late 1914, with the onset of hostilities, she was requisitioned by the Admiralty on November 26 of 1914, converted for use as a Stores Carrier and Depot Ship, and commissioned as HMS *Zaria* on December 10 of that same year.

The Auxiliary Patrol Base at Longhope was a part of the effort to blockade Germany, to prevent ships from delivering goods and materials to that country through the inspection of any and all shipping to German or German-occupied ports. To this end, passenger and cargo vessels were requisitioned, armed and crewed by Royal Navy personnel with orders to stop, question, inspect and if necessary to board and seize vessels, be they enemy, neutral – or at times British – intercepted by the patrolling ships.

The bases from which these Auxiliary ships operated and, of course, other Royal Navy bases became targets for the German reaction, and were in their turn visited by surface vessels, submarines and mine-layers. To counter this, the British Admiralty hired, built and requisitioned smaller boats, often fishing-vessels, to patrol and to sweep for mines.

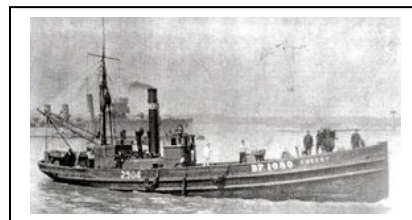


These smaller vessels, drifters, trawlers, yachts and the like were often placed under the control of larger ships such as *Zaria* whose task – amongst others – was to cater to the supply, administrative and personnel needs of the afore-mentioned smaller vessels.

(Right above: *The photograph of a peace-time (?) SS Zaria is from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Historical Society web-site.*)

Such was to be the experience of Seaman Fowlow during his time of service in the Orkney Islands: while he was indeed transferred to HMS *Zaria*, it is not certain that he ever set foot on her deck. However, he was to serve in five of those minor vessels, two drifters, two trawlers and a further uncertain vessel, all of which were, as seen above, *Zaria's* responsibility.

The first of these three was the drifter *Elysian Dawn*. Built in 1909, she was a hired drifter, Admiralty number 2058, from the Scottish coastal city of Aberdeen, and was of just ninety-one tons weight. *Elysian Dawn* came into war-time service as a patrol boat in November of 1914, survived the conflict and, twenty years later, was to be requisitioned once again, on that next occasion to work from 1940 to 1945 during the Second World War.



Seaman Fowlow was to serve on His Majesty's Drifter *Elysian Dawn* from January 1, 1915, until the final day of March of the same year, to thereupon be transferred to another comparable craft.

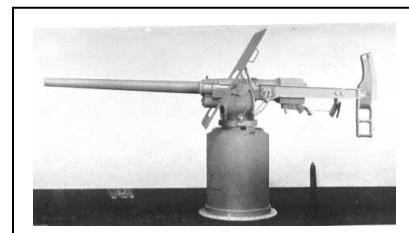
(Right above: *The Royal Navy Drifter 'Cheery' - which was to survive the conflict -, of the same class as 'Elysian Dawn' the photograph showing a small gun mounted on her fore-deck - photograph from Wikipedia)*



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

HM Drifter *Laurel Crown* was the second of the boats on which Seaman Fowler was to serve at Longford. Ten tons lighter than *Elysian Dawn*, she was also three years younger. She had begun her service with the Royal Navy in December of 1914 as a net-vessel - inspection and repair of anti-submarine netting - and was Seaman Fowlow's ship from April of 1915 until the end of August of that same year. On June 22 of 1916, *Laurel Crown* was to strike a mine laid on 29 May 1916 by German submarine U-75. Nine of her crew were lost - whether that was her entire complement is not clear.

Seaman Fowlow's next attachment was to His Majesty's Trawler *Ilustra*. She had been built in 1914 and re-fitted and armed - with one four-inch naval gun and a single six-pounder weapon - before entering service in August of that same 1914 as a mine-sweeper, a task that she was to undertake throughout the *Great War* and on into 1919.



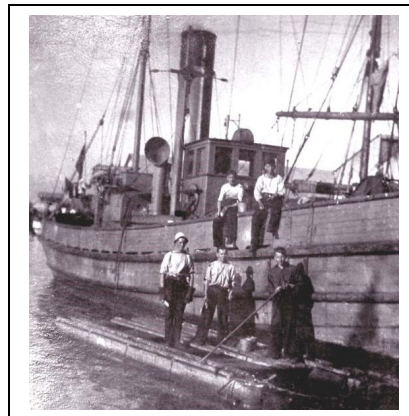
Seaman Fowlow was to be a member of her crew from August 27 of 1915 for less than two months, until October 18.

(Right above: *A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss six-pounder gun such as would had been mounted on the fore-deck of the trawler 'Ilustra' - from Wikipedia)*

The identity of the fourth ship, to which he was posted on October 19, 1915, is not quite clear although it is perhaps likely to have been the hired whaler *Ramna**. Having been re-fitted for war-time purposes and armed with one of the aforementioned six-pounder guns, she served in British waters as of January of 1915 until after the War's end.

**The other possibilities are two vessels, both of them glorying in the name 'Camellia': the first a larger ship, a sloop; the other another requisitioned drifter. In both cases the vessel was to survive the conflict having gone through four years of service without incident.*

His Majesty's Trawler *Inchkeith* was the last of *Zaria*'s flotilla to which Seaman Fowlow was to be posted. Built in 1906 and having worked in the fishing-fleet out of the port of Leith – on the Firth of Forth and adjacent to the Scottish capital, Edinburgh – she was also to serve as of December of 1914 as a mine-sweeper. She was another survivor of the hostilities and worked on into 1919, disposing of un-exploded mines.



(Right above: *The photograph showing crew-members re-fitting their unidentified trawler for mine-sweeping duties is from the 'Pinterest' web-site to which it was donated by Dr. David Beatty and Leslie Goodwin.*)

His fourteen-month service on HMT *Inchkeith* was to be the longest period that Seaman Fowlow would serve on any ship during his war-time and post war-time naval career: it lasted from November 26 of 1915 until January 23 of 1916. During this time there appears to have been no exotic or perilous incident to punctuate the everyday tasks and duties of a seaman on one of His Majesty's small boats.

After his service with HMS *Zaria* in the Orkneys, Seaman Fowlow was transferred southward to England, more specifically to HMS *Victory* where he was to be posted for just twenty-three days.

HMS *Victory* was the Royal Navy port and facilities of Portsmouth at almost the other end of the country. It was also a holding-barracks where seamen were to await the summons to one of His Majesty's Ships which was in need of his services. This is likely what Seaman Fowlow was to do during this short period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned *HMS Victory*.

**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.

Thus, HMS 'Victory', the base to which Seaman Fowlow 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 the seamen (as opposed to the engine-room personnel, for example, in 'Victory II') such as Seaman Fowlow were to be stationed while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.

(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)



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 serving on shore.

No aforementioned ship of His Majesty was apparently to have been in need of Seaman Fowlow on this occasion as on February 17 he was thus placed on the books of another shore-based naval establishment, HMS *Pembroke* at the naval town of Chatham in the county of Kent. It was to be yet another fourteen weeks less two days before the anticipated call was eventually to come.

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



The timing of Seaman Fowlow's next attachment is a little unclear: it appears that he was to serve on both HMS *Briton* and then likely HMS *Triton*.

He had apparently been granted a furlough – it was usually about a month – back to Newfoundland, which would explain his *official* posting to *Briton*: We know this because in the Trinity-Dunfield Anglican Cemetery a monument mourns the loss of the couple's daughter, Daphne Bartlett Fowlow, who passed away at the age of five weeks on March 22

of 1918. Thus Seaman Fowlow must have begun home towards the end of May, 1917, at the end of his time at *Pembroke I*.

Having then returned to England, Seaman Fowlow appears to have been attached for just more than six months to one of the two ships of the Royal Navy named HMS *Triton*. Since one of the two appears to have been undertaking surveys in the Pacific Ocean at the time, it was surely the other, the requisitioned trawler of that name to which he was dispatched.

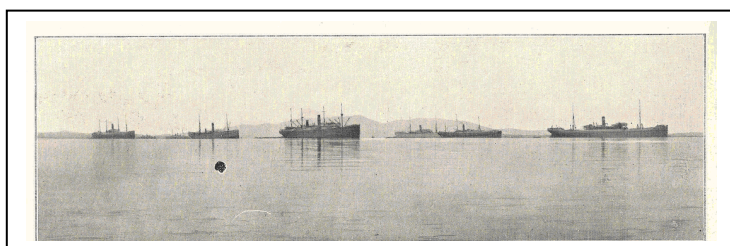
His Majesty's Trawler *Triton* was apparently one of a small flotilla of smaller craft working in the *Aegean Sea* as a minesweeper attached to HMS *Osiris II*, by that 1917 the submarine depot-ship* – and the name of the submarine base itself – centred at *Mudros Bay* and Harbour on the Greek island of *Limnos*.



**She had apparently also worked with smaller surface craft during the 'Gallipoli' landings on 1915 and likely with the subsequent withdrawals of December 1915 and January 1916.*

(Right above: *Mudros Bay*, seen here almost a century after the time of the '*Gallipoli Campaign*', although this likely also how it appeared in the days prior to the *Great War*. – photograph from 2011)

(Right: *Mudros Bay* – its tiny harbour seen here full to capacity in 1915 with Allied shipping during the '*Gallipoli Campaign*' – was also the base of a great number of medical facilities. – from *Illustration*)



(Right: *Portianos Military Cemetery*, *Mudros*, on the Greek island of *Lemnos*, in which lie three Newfoundlanders, all fatalities of the *Great War*: Privates *Ignatius Furey* and *John Myrick* of the *Newfoundland Regiment*, and Seaman *Alexander Chalk* of the *Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland)*, all of whose stories are to be found elsewhere in these files. – the photograph is from 2011)



Once again Seaman Fowlow was to be spared any untoward experience during his service on board ship and on December 9 he was once again the responsibility of HMS *Victory* although he may not have arrived back in the United Kingdom until a later date.

There then appears to have been an eight-month lull in Seaman Fowlow's naval career, this time passed by him at HMS *Victory*, from November 10 until July 9 of the following year. What his tasks and duties were to be during this second long term of service at a shore-based establishment appears not to have been documented.



**It should be remembered as well that this was the time of the Halifax Explosion during which a great deal of trans-Atlantic traffic was disrupted – and it may also have affected the distribution of postings – to such work as convoy escort, for example..*

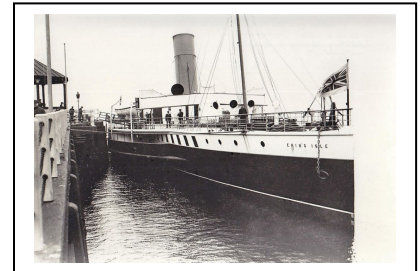
(Preceding page: A view of an obliterated Halifax with its harbour in the distance, the photograph taken two days after the incident. – from ‘Wikipedia’)

After those several months with HMS *Victory*, it was HMS *Pekin*, the Auxiliary Patrol Base in the east-coast town and fishing port of Grimsby, to which Seaman Fowlow was to be dispatched – at least on paper – on July 10, 1918. What his first duties were at *Pekin* appear likewise not to have been recorded but only ten days following his arrival there he was posted to a requisitioned trawler, *Island Prince*, for an unspecified amount of time, and subsequently to the paddle-steamer become mine-sweeper, *Erin’s Isle*.

This latter vessel had been built in 1912 for the *Belfast and County Down Railway* to serve the passenger service between the Welsh town of Bangor and several Irish destinations, notably Belfast. Because of her high speed, her manoeuvrability and her shallow draught, she was well suited for use as a mine-sweeper and thus she was requisitioned by the Admiralty in 1915, refitted and armed to become the Royal Navy’s first such vessel.

Seaman Fowlow’s posting to *Pekin* at Grimsby suggests that *Erin’s Isle* was sweeping the waters of the North Sea in that area at the time but that is only speculation as there appears to be no further information about the location of the ship. And even if so, she was soon to move southwards, as was Seaman Fowlow, to the port of Sheerness on the River Thames. He was likely to be there on HMS *Actaeon*, an elderly ship taken out of service at sea to become a hulk serving as a torpedo school.

Seaman Fowlow re-joined *Erin’s Isle* on New Year’s Day of 1919. Although by that time the Armistice of November 11 had come into effect, there was still much work to be undertaken by the mine-sweepers as the seas were still littered with thousands of active and, in many cases, free-floating mines which had been sown by both sides – and their sites often not having been recorded.



(Right above: The photograph of the side-paddle-steamer ‘Erin’s Isle’ is from the paddlesteamers.info web-site)

The following is the transcription of a letter that was sent to Seaman Fowlow’s wife, detailing how her husband had died in the King’s Service. Written to her by First Lieutenant Hanlan it has been made available by the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans’ Affairs, Canada:

*3 Dene Street,
New Bridge Road,
Hull, England
Feb. 26th 1919*

My Dear Mrs. Fowlow,

(continued)

Just a few lines to express to you my greatest sympathy in the loss of your husband in HMS Erin's Isle late on February 7th, and I should like to let you know the circumstances in which he died.

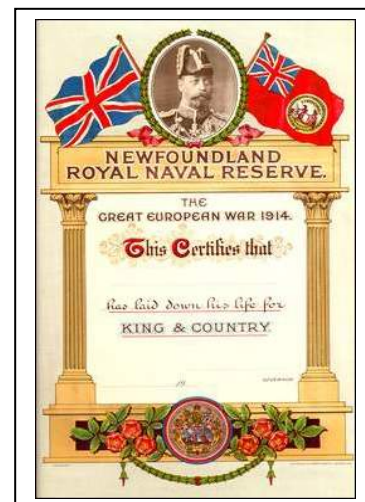
Well, on the evening of February 6th we left Sheerness and anchored near the Edinbro Light Vessel, and as the weather was fine we were staying there until 7 a.m. on Friday morning. I had given orders that all the hands had to be called at 6 a.m. so that everything would be ready to get under way at 7 a.m. Well, I had just been called myself at 6.05 when a drifting mine struck us and exploded on the starboard side forward, right underneath where the seaman's (sic) quarters were, and blew the ship practically in two halves, and she sank in about 2 minutes, taking 23 men down with her, nearly all seaman (sic). I think only 3 that lived in the seaman's (sic) quarters got away after striking the mine, and one of them was a young fellow belonging to Newfoundland named John Bartlett, who I have asked to call and see you when he gets home again.

Well, Mrs. Fowlow, I had your husband with me ten months in the Erin's Isle and I can say that I have never had a nicer or more straight-forward man in every way than Jack, and he was looking forward to March 31st, as he expected to get home any time after that, and I felt it very much to think that he is gone.*

Well, Mrs. Fowlow, if there is anything I can let you know I should be very pleased if you write to the address enclosed and it would be a great pleasure to do anything I can for you in your great trouble, and I might also say that you can be assured that Jack died a hero and wound (sic) not have saved himself at the expense of others if he had the chance, for a more honest upright, clean living man never went in a ship than your dear husband, and I hope the memory of him will give you health and strength to be [ar the] (sic) great loss you have had in the sudden loss of one who was liked by everyone who knew him.

I don't think I can say any more just now, as I have been very ill myself since it happened, but I felt as if I must try and let you know something of what happened. So I must conclude with kindest regards and my deepest sympathy to you and all his relations.

*Yours Sincerely,
J.W. Harden,
1st Lieutenant H.M.S. Erin's Isle*



(Right above: 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)

**This may have been an exaggeration as the dates on his sparse Service Records appear to suggest that he served less time than that on her...unless he was transferred on her as a member of her crew when she moved from HMS 'Pekin' at Grimsby to HMS 'Actaeon' at Sheerness. Even then, ten months is still an over-estimation.*

The son of Abram (Abraham) Fowlow, fisherman, and of Mary Frances (née Malone) of the community of Trinity North Side he was brother to Charlotte-Elizabeth, to Frances, Eleanor-Brown, Weston, Amy and to Rosella-Mary.*

John Fowlow was also married, to Lillian of whom the author has managed to find no further information.

Seaman Fowlow 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 John Fowlow was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) and 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 22, 2023.