

Seaman William Freake, Number  
2210x, having no known last resting-  
place, is commemorated on a bronze  
beneath the Caribou at the  
Newfoundland Memorial Park at  
Beaumont-Hamel.

Having relinquished his occupation, likely as a fisherman, and likely having then travelled from Joe Batt's Arm on Fogo Island to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on October 7 of 1916 William Freake reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).

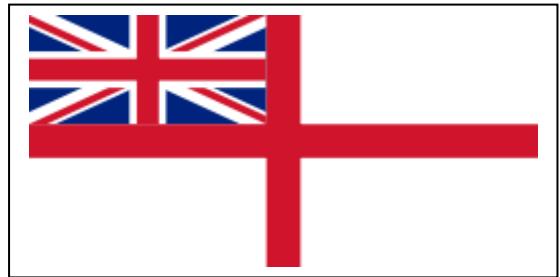
On that same October day of 1916, he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for the...*Duration of the War*...and underwent the required medical assessment on the morrow. He also most likely was to attest at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, 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.)



**(continued)**

*\*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 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.*

*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.*

*(continued)*

(Right below: *HMS 'Calypso' is seen here in full sail. The vessel was to be re-commissioned 'HMS Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy.* – The Royal Navy photograph dated 1898 is by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum)

Five weeks and three days after having been...taken on strength...at 'Briton', his sparse Service Records suggest that it was on November 14, having by that time been promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit*, that the now-Seaman Freake was on his way to the United Kingdom.

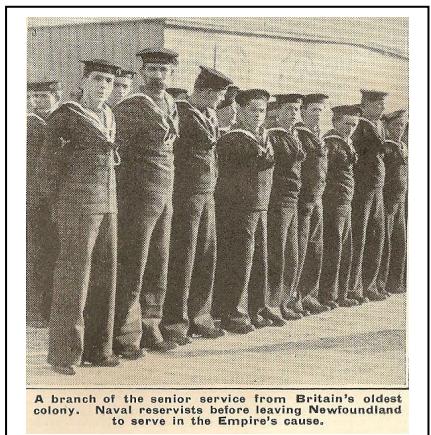
The Discharge Register of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) records that it was on the *Reid Company* ship, the SS *Sagona* that he, Seaman Freake, and the others of his draft were to leave St. John's for the United Kingdom and for overseas service.



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

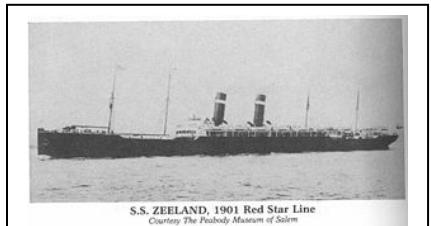
However, local newspapers report that while the vessel was to sail on that date with one-hundred fifty passengers on board, it – and they – were to travel directly by sea only as far as North Sydney\* from where the naval reservists were then obliged to travel by train via Halifax to the Canadian port-city of Québec.

\**Where the ship was to be for the next while, going back and forth to Port aux Basques.*



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

Transport to the United Kingdom for the one-hundred twenty-eight Newfoundland naval reservists – although as was often the case, they were identified as Canadians – and their (presumed) officers was to be provided by the *White Star* liner, *Northland*, which had originated its voyage from Montréal and was on its way to Liverpool on England's north-west coast.



S.S. ZEELAND, 1901 Red Star Line  
Courtesy The Peabody Museum of Salem

*Northland* arrived there on December 1 of that 1916.

(Right above: *'Northland' was originally the Belgian ship 'Zeeland', but her German-sounding name obliged the war-time British owners to change it to the more expedient 'Northland'. Employed for a while as a troop-ship, in August of 1916 she recommenced her commercial runs, carrying military personnel whenever the situation presented itself.* – photograph of a peace-time Zeeland in 1906 from Wikipedia)

(continued)

On December 1 of that 1916, *Northland* having docked in Liverpool, the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training – or to simply await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part operating around the coast of England.

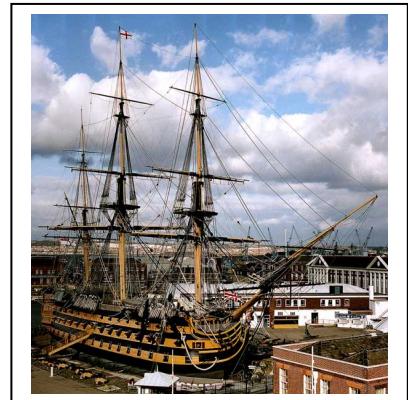
In the case of Seaman Freake, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *Victory I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until likely the end of the third week of January of the New Year, 1916 – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned *HMS Victory* is not clear.

*\*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 Freake 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 Freake were to be stationed while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.*

*(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)*

Seaman William Freake – four cousins by that name had enlisted together on that October 10 – was now to remain on the nominal roll at *Victory I* for one-hundred days before being

transferred elsewhere. On February 23-24, 1917, he was on his way to the East Anglian county of Suffolk and to the Royal Navy shore-based establishment in the environs of the small village of Shotley and at the nearby port of Harwich: HMS *Ganges*.

Once again it is not clear exactly what his duties were during the time when at first he was stationed there. HMS *Ganges*, as recounted above, was similar to the other land-based establishments in that there was also a ship of the same name, *Ganges*, to which all the personnel at Shotley and Harwich was nominally attached.

But of course, even though the ship in question was elderly and had little value as a ship of the Royal Navy, it was manned by a crew...and it is not clear whether or not Seaman Freake of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve was to serve at HMS *Ganges* the land-establishment, or on HMS *Ganges* the ship – if either.

(Right: *HMS 'Ganges'* (ex – 'Minotaur'), harbour service and base ship at Shotley and Harwich as of 1913, was a wooden iron-clad vessel, built in 1863, of 10,690 tons. She was eventually sold in 1922. – from Wikipedia)



Of course, it may have been neither as he may have been attached immediately to a ship, the vessel in question being a mine-sweeper of the *Harwich Force* based at the town and harbour of the same name\*, the requisitioned paddle-steamer from Blackpool, *Queen of the North*. Apart from mine-sweepers, the *Force* also comprised destroyers and cruisers, one of a number of such flotillas which patrolled the waters of the English east coast and the North Sea, and sometimes ventured as far as the shores of occupied Belgium.

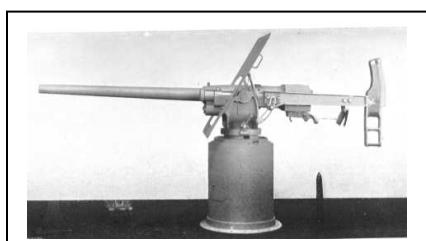
\**Harwich, the port from which had left the Mayflower some centuries before for the next stage of her journey to North America, is situated on the mouth of the River Stour, perhaps twenty kilometres down-stream from the now-defunct HMS 'Ganges' at Shotley and during the Great War was apparently an appendage of that naval establishment.*

(Right: *The photograph of the paddle-minesweeper 'Queen of the North'* is from the '*Harwich & Dovercourt – a time gone by*' web-site. Built in 1895 she served commercially until March 29, 1916, when she was requisitioned.)



Paddle-steamers apparently were well suited to the task of mine-sweeping because the ships had a shallow draught, had a relatively high speed and were very maneuverable.

(Right: *A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss six-pounder gun*, two of which were mounted on '*Queen of the North*' during her re-fitting in Preston Dock – from Wikipedia)



No documentation appears to be available a propos the duties and tasks undertaken on '*Queen of the North*' by Seaman Freake, the lack of which likely suggests a period of nothing other than the everyday shipboard routines. Neither are the dates of that service given unto us: all that is recorded is the date of his official attachment to *Ganges*, the afore-mentioned February 24, and the day when he was reported as D.D. – *Discharged Dead* – July 20.

On that date the *Queen* had been patrolling to the north-east of the *Shipwash Light Vessel* – a floating light-house – in shoal waters some fifty kilometres to the north-east of her base at Harwich. Days before, the German submarine UC-4 had laid a mine-field there, one of which was struck by Seaman Freake's ship. There was a very large explosion and – according to a survivor, of which there were apparently nineteen – sank within thirty seconds.

(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 son of Aaron Freake (also found as *Freke* and *Freek*e), fisherman, and of Sarah Ann Freke (née *Coffin*\* of Joe Batt's Arm, Fogo, Newfoundland, he was also younger brother to Stewart.

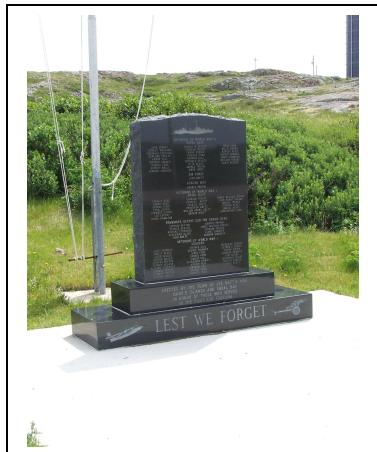
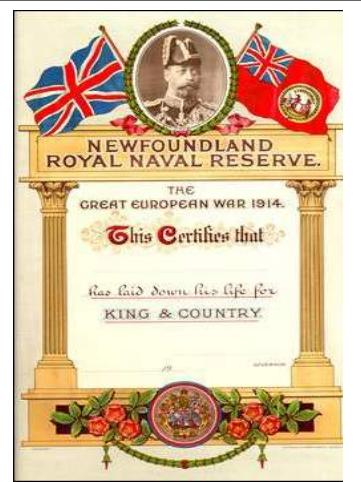
\**The couple was married on the Barr'd Islands on October 26, 1893.*

James William Freake was reported as having died on July 20, 1917, in the sinking of His Majesty's Minesweeper *Queen of the North*: date of birth in Joe Batt's Arm, Newfoundland, August 13, 1897 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register – as is the name James) but also August 3, 1898 (from his enlistment papers).

(Right above: The sacrifice of William Freake is honoured on the War Memorial in Joe Batt's Arm. – photograph from 2013)

*Seaman Freake 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 James William Freake 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca).  
Last updated – January 22, 2023.**