



**(Above: A photograph of the grave of Seaman Gilbert not being as yet available, this image from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission web-site is of the Bari War Cemetery, wherein he lies, in the Italian port-city of the same name.)**

**Seaman William Gilbert, Number 2121x, is buried in the Bari War Cemetery, Italy: grave reference, 15.G.21..**

**Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, William Gilbert thereupon travelled from the Placentia Bay community of Famish Cove to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on June 16 of 1916, he reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).**



**On that same mid-June day 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 likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.**

**(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 attired in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site and 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.)**

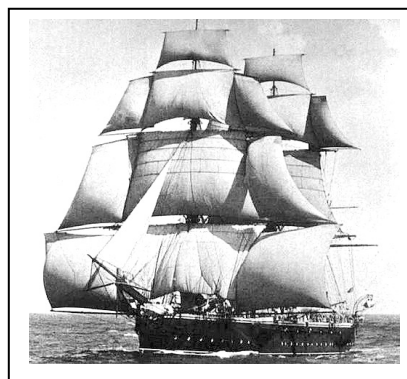
**\*The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the ‘Union Jack’; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a ‘Jack’ only when flown from the bow of a ship.**

**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 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.**

**(Preceding page: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in early 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was about to be launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph, taken of the 'Newfoundland Calypso' by the Royal Navy in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)**



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

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

**(Right below: The newly-constructed C-Class cruiser 'Calypso' of 1916, seen here on an un-recorded date during the later years of the Great War, was to be sunk by an Italian submarine in 1940. – from Wikipedia)**



**Six weeks less a day after having reported to HMS Briton, and having been promoted by this time from the rank of Seaman Recruit, the now-Seaman Gilbert was to board ship for trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom and to overseas service.**

**The ship was the SS Sicilian at the time making its third – and last - direct ocean-crossing of the year from St. John's. On this occasion it was again to carry personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment – a draft of two-hundred forty-two officers and other ranks that was also leaving for overseas service although their destination was to be the Regimental Depot in Scotland rather than Royal Navy establishments in southern England.**



**Allan Line, S.S. "Sicilian"**

**(Right above: Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when 'Sicilian' was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War. During the Great War she was apparently requisitioned as a troopship on only one occasion: in October of 1914 she was a vessel of the armada which transported the (1<sup>st</sup>) Canadian Division overseas to the United Kingdom. She otherwise continued to work commercially between Great Britain and Canada for her owners, the Allan Line and later Canadian Pacific, at times carrying soldiery if and when her schedule allowed.**

**(continued)**

Upon the arrival of *Sicilian* in British waters, the ship proceeded to the south-coast Royal Naval port of Devonport where the first contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment had landed with the (1<sup>st</sup>) Canadian Division in October of 1914.

(Right: *A no-longer bustling Devonport Harbour, today bereft of its former importance – photograph from 2012*)

Having arrived in port on or about September 9, from there, while the soldiers now boarded a train for the journey north to Scotland and other sailors were dispatched onwards to their English destinations, Seaman Gilbert remained *in situ* to report to the Royal Navy complex of HMS *Vivid*, established there at Plymouth-Devonport.



*Vivid I* (the establishment had several Divisions) was a training ground for seaman recruits and also one of the holding barracks for already-trained seamen awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships and it was *Vivid I* to which Seaman Gilbert was then attached for a period of five weeks less a day.

*\*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 Gilbert 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 Gilbert were likely initially to be stationed – as well as potential signallers and telegraphers – to await service on one of His Majesty's ships.*

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



On October 1-2 of that 1916 Seaman Gilbert was dispatched to answer the summons to a ship: the vessel was to be the monitor HMS *Terror*, based at the time at Dover on England's Kentish coast.

*\*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.*

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

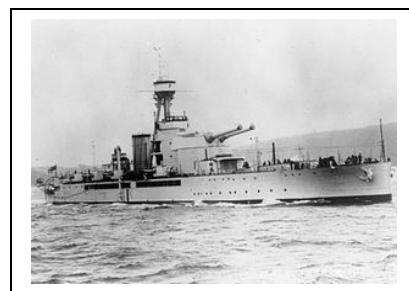
*Thus began the 'Dover Patrol'. In its early days it was a motley collection of old, even obsolete war-ships, for the most part destroyers, to which was very soon to be added a number of requisitioned and purpose-built small vessels, notably fishing-boats, trawlers and drifters, lightly-armed but capable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

But while much of the work of the *Dover Patrol* was to keep open the vital shipping-lanes and to protect England's numerous east-coast and south-coast harbours, at times it was to go to the offensive and harass the ports of occupied Belgium on the far side of the North Sea.

A ship was designed for that particular sort of purpose – in fact, one had been designed a century before – a vessel with heavy guns and a shallow draught, capable of sailing in shallow waters and from there bombarding targets with heavy guns from close range. The ship was a monitor.

HMS *Terror* was not launched until May of 1916. She was a relatively light warship of just eight-thousand tons and with a shallow draft to be capable of operating close to shore or even in rivers, but armed with eight four-inch guns and, primarily, two huge weapons of fifteen-inch calibre.

(Right: The 'Erubus-Class' monitor, HMS 'Terror', shown here in 1933 in the waters of Plymouth Sound, was to serve again during the first years of the Second World War, to then be sunk off the North African coast in February of 1941. Her sister-ship 'Erubus' would subsequently go on to support the Allied D-Day landings of June 6, 1944, in Normandy. – photograph from Wikipedia)



Seaman Gilbert was to remain with *Terror* for some seven weeks, until November 15, before then transferring to another Royal Navy shore-based facility, HMS *Pembroke* – in fact to *Pembroke I*, again both a training station and holding-barracks for seamen.

HMS *Pembroke* was situated in the naval town of Chatham on the River Medway, a tributary of the better-known River Thames, and downstream to the east of London. Seaman Gilbert was to remain there for a month, until December 16, before a further posting was to be ordered.

(Right above: Some of the impressive buildings of the large Royal Navy complex which was a part of 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)



That posting was northwards to the Orkney Islands, more precisely, to *Scapa Flow*, the home base of the British Grand Fleet during much of the *Great War* – and also during the next, from 1939 to 1945. The ship in question was HMS *Blake*, the Depot Ship responsible for the administration, the supplies, the maintenance, the finances and the general well-being of the 11<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla of some twenty vessels.

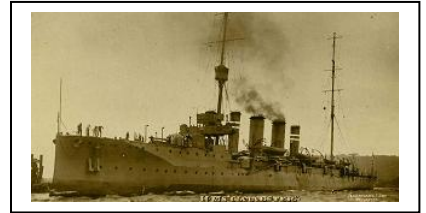


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(Preceding page: *The elderly armoured cruiser HMS 'Blake', launched in 1889, was to serve as a Depot Ship during the entirety of the Great War – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site*)

Seaman Gilbert was on the nominal roll of HMS *Blake* for sixty-six days, from December 17, 1917, until February 21 of the New Year, 1918, but nothing else of note appears to have been documented. He was then re-transferred to the records of *Vivid III*, the trawler Division of HMS *Vivid*, where he had served following his arrival from Newfoundland.

However, it may well be that the days spent on *Vivid III*'s books, six in all, may well have been spent in transit to his next attachment, this in the Mediterranean Sea to a light cruiser, HMS *Gloucester*. From December 1916 until the time of the Armistice of November 1918 – except for the month of April, 1917 – she was to serve in the Adriatic Sea with the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Cruiser Squadron.



Seaman Gilbert officially joined her on April 29 of 1918.

(Above right: *The photograph of the light Town-class cruiser HMS 'Gloucester' is from the naval-history web-site.*)

What exactly *Gloucester*'s duties were at this time – or what Seaman Gilbert's were once he had joined her is not clear – the available log-books of HMS *Gloucester* document only as far as the end of the year 1915; but the 8<sup>th</sup> LCS appears to have been based in the Italian ports of Brindisi and Taranto as part of a multi-national force. The documentation of naval actions – of all belligerents in the Adriatic, and indeed of the Mediterranean - during the latter part of the *Great War* appear still to be incomplete.

For how long Seaman Gilbert had been suffering – or was to suffer – from depression is not recorded. All that appears to have been recorded is a single sentence found at the end of his Service Record: *Drowned himself during fit of severe depression.*

The son of George Gilbert, fisherman, and of Phoebe Gilbert (née *Jarvis*\* – also found as *Jarvie*) of Famish Cove (also known as *Famish Gut*; until 1940 when re-named *Fair Haven*), he was also brother to Stephen (whom he named as his Next-of-Kin\*\*) and Robert.

\**The couple had been married in Trinity Cove, Trinity Bay, on February 6, 1891.*

\*\**The author has thus far been unable to find the later histories of the parents.*

Seaman William Gilbert was reported as having died of...*drowning*...on two dates, October 7 and 11 of 1918 (both from reputable sources): date of birth in Famish Cove, Newfoundland, March 25, in either 1897 or 1898.



(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*)

**Seaman Gilbert 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 William Gilbert 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.**