

Seaman Alan (also found as *Allan* and *Allen*) Hancock (found also as *Handcock*), Service Number 710x, having no known last resting-place, is buried in the Military plot of the General Protestant Cemetery on Waterford Bridge Road in St. John's.

Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Alan Hancock had originally presented himself for enlistment on December 9 of 1903, whereupon he was to undergo twenty-eight days of training. Apparently assigned a first service number, 31 (sic – this found in his records), he had been the three-hundred and twenty-second volunteer to register with the Naval Reserve.

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As with all pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years on the understanding that he would undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days. He had honoured this commitment and is recorded as having trained on five occasions – twice in 1907 – until, in December of the year 1908, Alan Hancock re-enrolled in the Reserve, likely to be assigned a second service number, 710x, which he would eventually carry with him into the war. Sometime during the year 1912 appears to have been the final occasion when he was to serve on HMS *Calypso* (see below); after that, more than a year was apparently then to pass before world events were to intervene and Alan Hancock would be called to honour his commitments to the Crown.

Summoned by *Royal Proclamation* from home to service just prior to the onset of hostilities, he relinquished his occupation as a broom-maker and, from his residence in St. John's, where by that time he was living with his wife, on August 3 of 1914, the day before the British *Declaration of War*, he was once again to report...*to duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that above-mentioned early-August day, Alan Hancock was signed on for wartime service* and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already previously done so - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance** to the King-Emperor, George V.

**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.*

***Had he done so in 1903 or 1908, it would have been to the preceding monarch, King Edward VII.*

(Right above: 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: 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 adjacent: 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)

Following some three months of duties in St. John's – no further training has been recorded* - Seaman Hancock, one of a draft of three-hundred five Naval Reservists, embarked on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner Franconia on the trans-Atlantic British-bound leg of its commercial route between New York and Liverpool.



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

**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.*

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



Once having arrived in the port-city of Liverpool on November 11, it appears that several of the men were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, having journeyed by train, reported there only hours later.

Seaman Hancock 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 *Pembroke* 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 training-station and holding-barracks for regular seamen and it thus was surely *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Hancock would have been attached, there to await a posting to one of 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 Hancock would likely have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' cap-band – at least until he met 'Hazel'.



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(Preceding page: *Buildings 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*)

Hazel had been launched at Greenock on the River Clyde in April of 1907. Weighing just more than twelve-hundred tons, she was to go into service carrying both passengers and cargo between Scotland and Ireland. In mid-November of 1914 the ship was requisitioned by the Admiralty for war-time service as an armed boarding steamer and was converted for that purpose being equipped with two twelve-pounder naval guns.



(Right above: *A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) and twelve hundred-weight (1200 lbs. the weight of the barrel and breech) gun, here seen adapted for use in 1941. – photograph taken at the Royal Artillery Museum 'Firepower' at Woolwich in 2010*)

She was commissioned as HMS *Hazel* on the last day of that same month, the day on which Seaman Hancock joined her.



(Right above: *The photograph of 'Hazel' apparently seen here as HMS 'Hazel' is from the clydeships.co.uk web-site via google.com.*)

Seaman Hancock was not to serve for long on board the vessel; it is not even sure that she left port during that period. He was to return to HMS *Pembroke* on the final day of the year 1914, there to await a further posting.

It was to come some three months later when he was officially attached to the *Stephen Furness*. A former passenger ship of some seventeen-hundred tons, she had been converted in the year 1914 in order to serve as a squadron supply ship which she did from December of that 1914 until March of 1916.

She was then transformed into an armed boarding cruiser armed with two 4.7-inch naval guns, re-named as *Royal Scot* and worked with the 10th Cruiser Squadron inspecting the cargoes of commercial merchant vessels.

HMS *Stephen Furness* was subsequently torpedoed and sunk by *U-boat 64* near *Belfast Lough* on December 13 of 1917 with a loss of one-hundred one lives.

(Right: *The image of the armed boarding cruiser HMS 'Royal Scot' (formerly 'Stephen Furness') is from 'The Vimy Foundation' web-site.*)



But Seaman Hancock was to serve on HMS *Stephen Furness* only until the above-mentioned March – March 8 to be exact – of 1916 when a further transfer was to come about and he was dispatched to the east coast of Scotland, to the recently-opened, as late as 1912, Naval base - fully equipped and with a dockyard - sited on the Cromarty Firth in close vicinity to the town and port of Invergordon.

There were two ships serving with the Royal Navy at the time which were named *Thalia*: one was soon to become a Q-ship, a decoy vessel converted to seem innocuous - but in fact heavily armed – and intended to lure unsuspecting U-boats to the surface where it was intended that the hidden guns destroy them. The plan was never all that successful.

(Right below: *The photograph of 'Warships in Invergordon Harbour' is from the nosasblog.wordpress.com web-site via Google.com*)

The other *Thalia* was an elderly wooden ship, built as early as 1869, which was to serve the base at *Cromarty Firth* as a harbour service and base ship. As such she was responsible for the flotilla of smaller craft which inspected and repaired nets, patrolled and swept for mines, escorted larger vessels and in general assured the security and well-being of the entire area.



It was surely to this other part of HMS *Thalia* that Seaman Hancock was attached or if not to the ship *Thalia* herself, to some of the shore facilities which shared her name, or to some of those aforesaid minor vessels.

In fact, it appears that he was to serve on two of them: *Cameo* and *Rodino**.

**There may have been a third but the name is difficult to identify and may in fact have been the above-noted 'Rodino'.*

Both of these ships were requisitioned and hired trawlers, both were relatively small, both were armed with a single twelve-pounder naval weapon (seen further above), and both had been ordered into war-time service as mine-sweepers in early 1915. Neither of them appears to have been involved in any noteworthy incident during the *War* which both appear to have survived*.

**It was thought for a while that 'Rodino' and three other armed trawlers had been responsible for the sinking of the U-Boat 74 by gunfire off Peterhead on May 27, 1916, but it is now felt that the submarine was the victim of a mine-handling accident.*

It was on December 11-12, 1916, nine months after having begun service at HMS *Thalia*, that Seaman Hancock was transferred to HMS *Pembroke* for a third occasion. His own service records show was now to *officially* remain posted there for twenty-three weeks and two days, until May 24 of the year following, 1917.

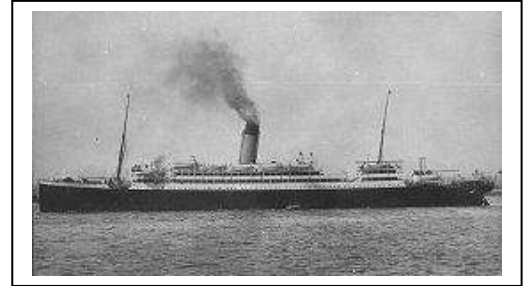
However, this may not be correct (see * immediately below).

**One of the 'Gower Remembers' series' document records that at this time Seaman Hancock was to take ship to return to Newfoundland. The vessel was HMS 'Laurentic' which was to strike two mines off the west coast of Ireland and sink. Some three-hundred fifty of her passengers and crew were lost while just more than a hundred survived, Seaman Hancock one of the latter number.*

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(Right below: *The photograph of 'Laurentic', likely seen here in peace-time as no guns are visible on her decks, is from the Naval-History.net web-site*)

The same source records that it was not until March 7 of 1917 that Seaman Hancock eventually set foot on Newfoundland soil to be attached to the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) drill-ship, HMS 'Briton'. The reason for his return to Newfoundland appears to have simply been that he was found to be deserving to a period of furlough after two years of service, perhaps particularly following the 'Laurentic' episode.



But by that time he may also have been exhibiting the onset of the symptoms of cellulitis, an infection of the deep dermis of the skin. The area infected was his neck.

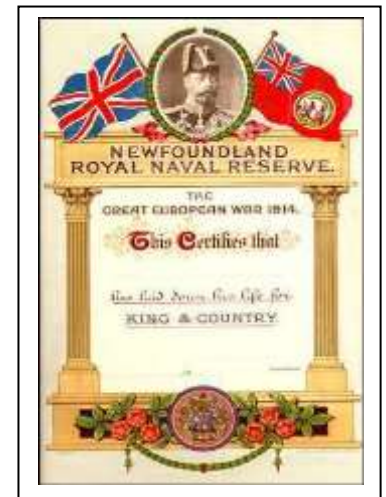
The modern-day treatment for cellulitis is with penicillin but in those days before antibiotics this was of course impossible. Seaman Hancock is recorded in the *Gower Remembers* papers as having entered the General Hospital in St. John's on June 1 of that year to submit to an operation to remove a growth in his neck, the details of which are not found among his papers. Alas! – the procedure was not a success and he may have suffered a subsequent loss of blood affecting the brain and resulting in unconsciousness and, subsequently, his death.

The son of George Hancock, fisherman, and of Elizabeth Hancock (née *Haines** or perhaps *Hines*) of the Bonavista Bay community of James Cove, he was also brother to Mary-Jane, Amelia, Eli and George.

(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 been married in the community of King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, on October 22 of 1863(?).*

Alan Hancock, carpenter and broom-maker at the time, had also married, to Fanny Dawe, on September 13 of 1905. The couple, both of Young Street at the time of their wedding, is also recorded as later having resided at Number 3, Hagarty Street in St. John's. The couple apparently was to parent three children: Mary-Alice, Estella-Mary and Eli, the two girls to precede their father in death.



Seaman Alan Hancock is recorded as having died at the age of thirty-six years, on June 2, 1917, during (*Gower Remembers* cites on the morrow of) the afore-cited operation: date of birth in James Cove, Newfoundland, June 16, 1881 (from Royal Navy Records) but November 16 of the same year (from a copy of Newfoundland Vital Statistics and the Methodist Parish of Musgravetown).

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Seaman Hancock served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as recorded elsewhere, notably by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Alan Hancock was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, British War Medal (centre) 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. Last updated – January 20, 2023.