



Seaman John Hibbs, Service Number 737x, is buried in Plymouth Old Cemetery (*Pennycomequick*) in the English county of Devon – Grave reference: EA RC 150. He shares his last resting-place with Able Seaman Robert B. Watson and Royal Marine Ernest Knight – John Hibbs' name is to be found towards the base of the stone.

Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), John Hibbs had initially presented himself for enlistment on January 19 of 1910, whereupon he was to undergo a recorded twenty-eight days of training, terminating on February 15 of that same year.

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As with all pre-War volunteers, he had *joined-up* for a five-year term of service and thus was to undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days on five occasions during the following fifty-one months. The last such, before world events then subsequently intervened and he was to be called to war-time service, took place in the entire month of February and the first day of March of 1914.

Summoned to service upon the onset of hostilities, John Hibbs relinquished his occupation of the time, and travelled from his declared residence in the nearby Conception Bay community of Portugal Cove to St. John's\*, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. There, on August 4 of 1914 – the day of 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, John Hibbs was signed on for war-time service\* and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he then attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

(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 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 fifteen weeks and a day of service and perhaps training\* in St. John's, Seaman Hibbs, 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. She sailed at nine o'clock in the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup>, its reservist passengers un-mentioned in the local newspapers.*



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(Preceding page: 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 un-dated 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 often 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.

Seaman Hibbs had no ship awaiting him and he was thus ordered to report to the Royal Navy shore-based establishment of HMS Vivid I situated on England's south coast at Plymouth-Devonport. Vivid I was a facility for training for seamen and a holding-barracks for those already trained and waiting for a summons to duty on board one of His Majesty's ships, a call which Seaman Hibbs would answer on December 24, Christmas Eve, of that same 1914.



(Right above: The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport shown here looking a lot less busy than when it welcomed the Canadian Division and the Newfoundland First Five-Hundred from the far side of the Atlantic in October of 1914. – photograph from 1911(?))

The ship to which he was to be attached was HMS Prince George. She was a nineteen year-old battleship of some fifteen-thousand tons of the Majestic-class which, like most of the world's battleships, was quickly becoming obsolete in comparison to the revolutionary new Dreadnought-class vessels.

However, the Royal Navy and the Admiralty still had some use for her and she began her war-time career as a vessel of the Channel Fleet, this force's duties to include the escort of the Royal Marine Division and the British Expeditionary Force from England to the Continent in the summer and autumn of 1914.



(Right above: The photograph of HMS 'Prince George' seen here just following her re-fit of 1904 is from Wikipedia.)

When Seaman Hibbs reported to Prince George, the ship was perhaps even then preparing for service in the Mediterranean Sea to where she was ordered in February of 1915. She was a ship of the combined French and British naval force which would conduct operations against the Turks in the area of the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli Peninsula.

(Right below: *One of the original German artillery pieces manned by the Turks which withstood the Allied bombardments and which were to repulse ships of both the 'Marine nationale' and the Royal Navy. As may be surmised, it and the fort on the Bosphorus where the weapon was sited during the Great War is today a historic attraction. – photograph from 2011*)

Those operations included the bombardment of the Turkish forts guarding the straits known as the *Bosphorus* which connect the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and which flow past the city of Istanbul, at the time the capital of the country\*; later that year she supported French troops with her gun-fire before then covering the British withdrawal from *Suvla Bay*\*\*.



*\*Today Turkey's capital city is Ankara in the Asiatic part of the country.*

*\*\*The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment served for three months at 'Suvla Bay' and formed a part of the rear-guard during the retreat.*

(Right: *Suvla Bay is the body of water just barely perceived furthest away on the left with the Newfoundland positions of September to December, 1915, further to the right but just as far away and behind what was known as the Salt Lake. – photograph from 2011*)

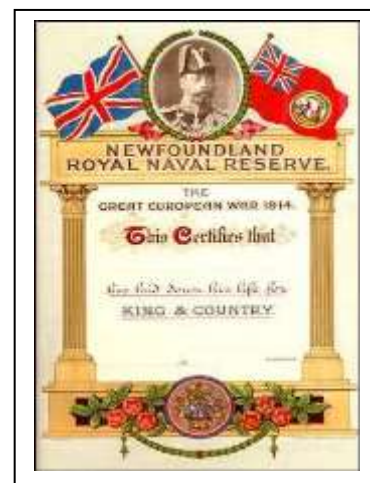


After the failure of the *Gallipoli Campaign* the interest of the French and British – the Western Front was of course of *prime* importance to the Allies – turned to Salonika where a front was being opened against the Bulgarians. Thus HMS *Prince George* and Seaman Hibbs remained stationed in the *Aegean Sea* for the months of January and February of 1916 whereupon she returned to England.

*Prince George* returned to the Naval dockyard at Chatham where she was then paid off and her crew dispersed to other duties. Seaman Hibbs returned to *Vivid I* where it was to be only a few weeks afterwards that he became ill. There was a Royal Naval Hospital – it is nowadays a residential complex – at Plymouth but he is not recorded as having been admitted there for treatment.

The son of Nathaniel Hibbs, fisherman to die of pulmonary tuberculosis on March 8, 1918, and of Elizabeth Hibbs, deceased of dropsy on July 31 of 1910, of Portugal Cove in the District of St. John's East, he was also brother to Alfred.

(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*)



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John Hibbs was also married, and was a father. He had wed Bertha Fry (also found as *Frye*) of Protestant Town, Portugal Cove in St. John's on March 10, 1912, and the couple had parented two daughters, Elizabeth and Hazel.



Seaman John Hibbs is recorded as having died from measles and pneumonia on April 30, 1916, at the reported age of twenty-eight years: date of birth at Portugal Cove, Newfoundland, September 15, 1888 (copied from Newfoundland Vital Statistics, in turn copied from parish records).

(Right above: *The photograph of Seaman John Hibbs is from the Virtual War Memorial, Veterans' Affairs Canada.*)

*Seaman Hibbs 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 John Hibbs was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, the 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 21, 2023.