

JAMES



Seaman John Arly James, Number 1869x, 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 of the time and having perhaps even travelled from his home community of Forteau on the coast of Labrador to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on September 9 of 1915 John Arly James reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

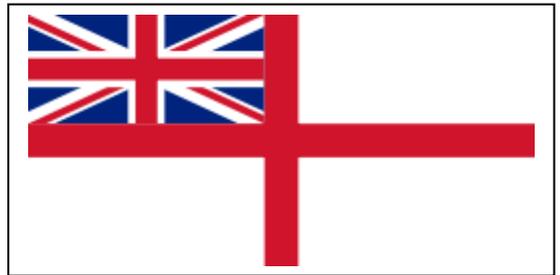


On that same September day he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year of war-time service and underwent the required medical assessment on the morrow. John Arly James most likely was then also to attest, pledging his allegiance to the 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.*)



**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.

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(Right: 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)



It is at this juncture that Seaman James' Service Records and the Discharge Register of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) part company. The former has him remaining with HMS Calypso until December 8 of that same year before leaving for overseas while the latter records what is written below – this version supported by the Passenger List of the SS Kyle (also see below).

Only sixteen days* after having been...*taken on strength*...on 'Calypso', his sparse Service Records document that it was on September 25, having by that time been promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit*, that the now-Seaman James was on his way to the United Kingdom.

**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 to be waived.*



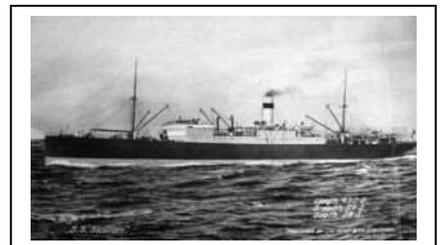
(Right: Naval reservists from Newfoundland at some time during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from *The War Illustrated*)

The date of departure may in fact have been September 23, the day after an *entertainment* had been held for...*a large number of reservists*...by the local Board of Trade. The Newfoundland naval personnel would then have crossed the island by train to embark onto the SS Kyle for passage on the night of September 24-25 from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, to arrive there at ten minutes past five in the morning.

The Kyle's passenger manifesto records a contingent on one-hundred forty-two reservists – Seaman *Jno* (sic) *A. James** among that number - then undertaking the onward journey at twenty past seven a.m. after a medical inspection, via Halifax to Québec on the *Intercontinental Railway* where the draft boarded ship for the trans-Atlantic passage.

**He was the only seaman with the family name 'James' in the Naval Reserve, so it was necessarily him.*

The *Discharge Register Royal Naval Reserve* appears adamant that the draft was now to board the SS *Sicilian* in Québec but there appears to be no further information in this regard available *a propos* the Newfoundland contingent*.



(Preceding page: *The image, likely in peace-time, of the ‘Allan Line’ ship ‘Sicilian’ is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

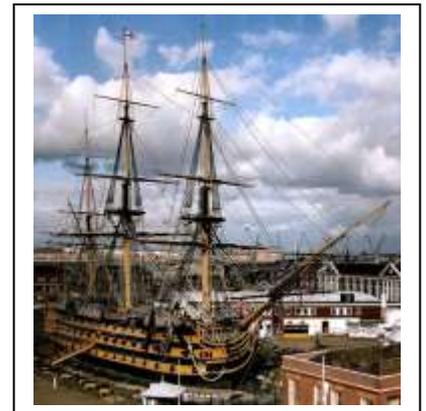
****While fairly accurate records have been kept for troop-transports, ‘Sicilian’ was not to be requisitioned as such – although at times chartered - and thus continued her commercial runs between Montréal, Québec and the United Kingdom, if and when possible accepting military personnel passengers. Any precise records of all her whereabouts and doings during the war-time period are rare indeed – any of late September, 1915, are even more elusive.***

Having arrived in the United Kingdom towards the end of the first week of that October of 1915, 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 James, the destination was to be HMS *Victory I*.

****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.



(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*)

Thus, HMS ‘Victory’, the base to which Seaman James 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.

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Furthermore, these establishments were at times divided into sections: ‘Victory I’ was where personnel (as opposed to the engine-room personnel, for example, in ‘Victory II’) such as Seaman James were to be stationed while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships.

His Service Records show it was not until the second day of April, 1916, that Seaman James was transferred from *Victory I*, at least *officially*, to service with HMS *Eagle* where he was to remain for eighty-five days, until almost the end of that June.

In that year of 1916 there were two vessels on the Royal Navy’s books named ‘Eagle’: One was an elderly tug-boat which was to be used for *harbour service* – but in *which* harbour that was to be is not made clear in her scant history; The second was an even older vessel also used for *harbour service* and as a Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve *drill-ship*, in the port-city of Liverpool.

Unfortunately there appears to be no photograph of either of these ships available nor is there any document that records on which one Seaman James may have served. But it may be of consolation to know that there appears to have been nothing notable pertaining to either of them having occurred during the occasion of Seaman James’ posting – or in fact at any other time during the *Great War*.

On June 28 of 1916 Seaman James returned to the nominal roll of *Victory I* where he was to remain for the brief period of only seventeen days before the Royal Navy saw fit to dispatch him to its Gunnery School on nearby *Whale Island* from where on a fine day Portsmouth Harbour is visible.

****HMS ‘Excellent’ was the name – and also still is the name - of the Royal Navy’s Gunnery School which had been established in a ship of the same name in 1829, the vessel being permanently moored just outside Portsmouth dockyard. As the years passed the ships were to be replaced, but each in turn was to be named HMS ‘Excellent’.***



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

And as the years passed, the use evolved of the nearby ‘Whale (originally ‘Whaley’) Island’ as facilities were constructed on it. In 1885 the Gunnery School was moved from the ship of the time to be re-established on the island itself.



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

Which is why for some three weeks, July 16 to August 7-8, Seaman James likely would have worn an HMS *Excellent* cap-band.

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On the second date cited above, August 7-8, he presented himself to the shore base known as HMS *Attentive*, there to be taken onto its strength.

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 just to the north-east of Dover and with a goodly number of British vessels, both commercial and naval – to which should be added the troop transports which from Dover 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 it all, although it was the mines that were to become the greatest threat to shipping.

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.



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

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The ‘Dover Patrol’ rapidly became a large and important entity of Britain’s naval defences and vessels from it were to be stationed not only at Dover but at other points around the nearby coast*.

***HMS ‘Ceto’ was the facility at nearby Ramsgate where several Newfoundlanders were to serve in ships of the Dover Patrol.**

The port at Dover and its naval presence there thus became HMS *Attentive* to which Seaman-Gunner James was to be attached in that August of 1915.

When exactly it was that Seaman-Gunner James first set foot on the deck of a ship of the *Dover Patrol* appears not to have been recorded.

(Right: The image is of the trawler ‘*Flying Wing*’, apparently a sister-ship of ‘*Vivanti*’, and which was also requisitioned for war-time service – in both World Wars – from the Newfoundland Book of Remembrance web-site.)



But when he did it was onto HMT *Vivanti* that he stepped. She was a requisitioned (Admiralty Number 3264) and hired trawler* of some two-hundred twenty tons having been built in 1915 and registered in the east-coast fishing-port of Grimsby as GY.878. Converted for war-time use she was armed with a single twelve-pounder gun and came into service in March, 1916, to be employed as a mine-sweeper.



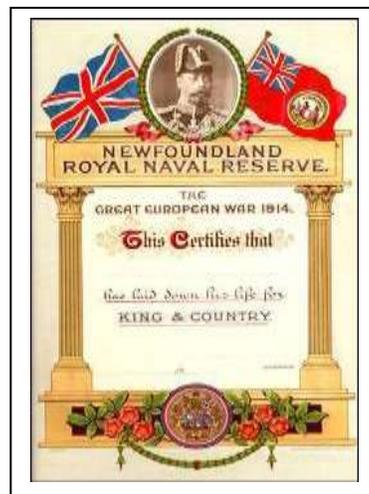
(Right above: A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) and twelve hundred-weight (1200 lbs. the weight of the barrel and breech) gun, here seen adapted for use in 1941. – taken at the Royal Artillery Museum ‘Firepower’, Woolwich, in 2010)



***During the War, 1456 such vessels were requisitioned from ports around the British Isles and even elsewhere, of which two-hundred sixty-four were to be lost.**

(Right above: *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)*

Seaman James was to be attached to *Attentive III* for some seven months although, as seen above, how much of that period he was to be a crew-member of HMT *Vivanti* has not been documented. Nor does there appear to be much documentation a propos the events of March 7 of 1917 – which some sources have as March 3.



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(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*)

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the term *to founder* when pertaining to a ship as simply filling with water and sinking. This is reportedly what happened to *Vivanti* on the above date while she was on patrol off the coast from the southern resort town of Hastings.

All that may be added is that whatever was the cause, it all happened quickly since, of the thirteen-member crew, there were no survivors.

(Right: *The photograph of Seaman John Arly James is from the Newfoundland Book of Remembrance web-site.*)

He was the son of William James, fisherman, and of Mary James (née *Blank* (sic)) of Forteau, Labrador – this before Labrador officially became a part of the Dominion of Newfoundland. Further family information has proved elusive.

Seaman John Arly James was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMT Vivanti*...on March 7 of 1917 at the age of twenty-five years: date of birth at Forteau, Labrador, April 23, 1891 (this date from only his enlistment papers).

Seaman James 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 Arly James 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. Last updated – January 21, 2023.

