



**Seaman Walter Marsh, Number 1159x\* is buried in Kirkmaiden Churchyard, Wigtownshire, Scotland: grave reference, Number 145.**

***\*While most sources cite 1159x as his service number, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission documents 1151x.***

**(continued)**

Walter Marsh had been one of those to enlist in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve prior to the *Great War*. He had done so on January 5, 1914, and undergone the requisite medical assessment while at the same time had undergone the required twenty-eight days (see further below) of training. There would have been more as at that time he committed himself to a five-year term of service with the Royal Naval Reserve although it may or may not have been during this period that he also thereupon pledged his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

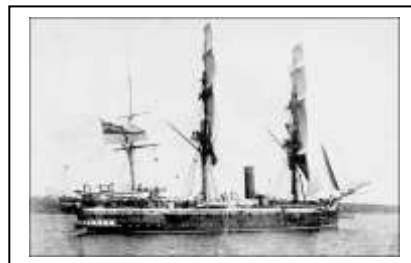
However the events of the summer of 1914 were to intervene and Walter Marsh was to be called upon to fulfil his obligations.

Having returned to his home in February of 1914, only some six months were to pass before the British Declaration of War and the summons to return...*to duty*. This he did, relinquishing his occupation of fisherman and returning to the Naval Reserve training-vessel, HMS *Calypso* – moored in St. John’s Harbour – on August 5 of that same 1914.

(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.*)



(Right: *At the outset of their career, the Calypso-Class ships were apparently considered to be superior vessels. Hybrids - powered by both steam and sail - they were able to police the outer reaches of the British Empire most efficiently and economically. The rapid progress in engine technology, however, was to mean that HMS Calypso and her sister-ships would soon be out-classed by newer vessels. – This Royal Navy photograph, taken before 1902 when the drill-hall was reportedly built on her upper deck and the funnel removed, is from Wikipedia*)



*\*In the early days 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.*

*(Right: Recruits of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) seen here in front of HMS 'Calypso'. The shed-like superstructure seen behind them had been built onto the ship in 1902 to serve as a drill-hall. Whether the vessel was still 'Calypso', or had become 'Briton' by this time (see further below) is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial Archives via Wikipedia)*



*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.*



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

*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.*

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



At some time during the period of three weeks plus a day following his arrival there was confirmation of Walter Marsh's rank as seaman. As seen above, he had already undergone the mandatory training earlier that year – all but two days which he appears to have been allowed to forego, perhaps by Royal Proclamation - so what his duties were to be during those twenty-two days is not certain.

But on September 5 he was to be seconded to the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy and to board the cruiser HMCS *Niobe* which at the time was in St. John's Harbour awaiting a detachment of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve.



**(Right above: 'Niobe', seen here in St. John's Harbour, was ceded by Great Britain to Canada on September 6 of 1910 to be the country's main naval vessel on its east coast. Superfluous to Royal Navy needs, she was an elderly... '1<sup>st</sup> Class Armoured Diadem Cruiser'... of eleven-thousand tons, armed with numerous guns, thirty-two altogether, and two torpedo-tubes.**

**However, by October of 1915 'Niobe' was worn out, to be disarmed and relegated to the role of harbour-service and headquarters ship in the harbour at Halifax see below). – from the collection of William Herbert Rose and Marmaduke Rose (by Courtesy of Bud (Donald Rose) and found in the *For Posterity's sake* – an RCN Historical Project web-site)**



**(Right above: A naval tender carry Newfoundland Reservists from HMS 'Calypso' to HMCS 'Niobe'\*. – The photograph by *The Evening Telegram* is from the *Provincial Archives*.)**

**\*Some sources refer to the ship – in 1914 - as HMS 'Niobe', but on September 6, 1910, she was re-commissioned as HMCS 'Niobe'.**

By the time that the detachment of just over one-hundred Newfoundland Reservists\* was to join the ship's complement on that September 5\*\*, HMCS *Niobe* had already started her war-time service

**\*They were apparently needed as, when *Niobe* was being re-fitted and readied for war, many of her crew had been ordered to Canada's west coast and were unavailable when the ship herself had been prepared to sail after her repairs.**

***\*\*Some few Reservists are recorded on their service records as having joined HMCS 'Niobe' on October 15 but this is highly unlikely as 'Niobe' had contact with two Royal Navy ships off New York as late as a quarter past six on the evening of October 13. Moreover, the discharge register of HMS 'Calypso' documents that September 5 was indeed the date on which some of these men joined 'Niobe' – the records of the others appear to be absent from the register.***

**HMCS *Niobe's* first duty after having absorbed the Newfoundland Reservists into her crew was to escort the Royal Canadian Regiment from Halifax on its passage to Hamilton, Bermuda, where it was to become the island's garrison. This mission accomplished, the ship sailed northwards to patrol the waters of the Cabot Strait and the Straits of Belle Isle, a task she shared with a Royal Navy cruiser, HMS *Lancaster*.**

**Following this episode of but a few weeks, by mid-October of 1914 she was working with the Royal Navy's 4<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, also known as *Force 'H'*, which was responsible for the inspection of shipping off the east coast of the United States and as far south as the West Indies.**

**The United States was a neutral country at the time – she did not join the conflict until April of 1917 – and thus this patrolling and policing of the western Atlantic was the burden of the Royal Navy during the first years of the *Great War*, as was the blockading of German shipping in American harbours. The job involved intercepting merchant ships of all flags, the inspection of cargoes and at times the boarding and the escorting thereof under armed guard of shipping to an Allied – or Associated – port.**

**This often also involved a great deal of boredom with the exception, perhaps, of the few days – every three weeks or so – when the patrol ships put into Halifax or, less often, Bermuda for re-fuelling and the replenishment of other supplies.**

**HMCS *Niobe* was already an elderly ship and the continuous effort of those several months resulted in an elderly *worn-out* ship. Thus when she returned to Halifax in July of 1915, it was decided that she should remain there to become a depot ship and headquarters for the other, smaller, ships of the Royal Canadian Navy on Canada's east coast. She was to remain in Halifax for the remainder of the conflict.**

**The Newfoundlanders of the Royal Naval Reserve were then to return to St. John's to serve on HMS *Calypso*, some for only a short period of duty, before being dispatched overseas to the United Kingdom and thence to ships of the Royal Navy.**

**Seaman Marsh's Service Record shows that he was put back on the nominal roll of HMS *Calypso* on September 1 of 1915 – although this may have been partially only on paper. Some three weeks later he was on his way once more.**

**He was a seaman of the draft of one-hundred forty-four Royal Navy Reserve personnel which was to travel across the island of Newfoundland to Port-aux-Basques likely overnight on September 23-24, 1915. The detachment then embarked on the Reid Newfoundland vessel, the SS *Kyle*, for passage to North Sydney where the ship docked on the morrow at ten minutes past five in the morning.**

(Right above: *The SS Kyle, in important element of Newfoundland's history, is seen here beached at the western extreme of the harbour in Harbour Grace. –photograph from 2012)*



From there the Reservists were to travel by the *Inter-Continental Railway* to Québec City where they would be taken on board the *SS Sicilian* arriving from Montreal on her commercial route across the Atlantic to Liverpool.

(Right: *The image of the SS Sicilian at anchor(?) just off-shore is from the WikiTree web-site.)*



It was likely at the end of the first week of October, 1915, and having disembarked in the afore-mentioned English port-city, that the Naval Reservists would thereupon have been either dispatched directly to a vessel or ordered to undergo further training – or otherwise 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 Marsh, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *Pembroke I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until likely the end of the second week of November of that year – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned *HMS Pembroke* has not been made clear.

*\*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.*

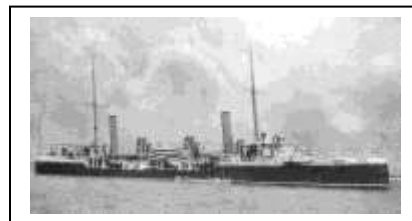


(Right: *A part of the large Royal Navy complex which was the HMS 'Pembroke' naval establishment at Chatham for just over one hundred years. Today it has been transformed into a university campus. – photograph from 2010)*

(continued)

Seaman Marsh was to remain on the nominal roll call of *Pembroke I*, until November 10, when he became attached, at least bureaucratically, to an older vessel, a former torpedo gunboat become mine-sweeper, HMS *Halcyon*.

(Preceding page: *At the onset of the conflict 'Halcyon' was already twenty years old. A ship of just more than a thousand tons, she was armed with two 4.7-inch naval guns, four six-pounder weapons and three torpedo tubes – further modifications were to come about in the years 1914 and 1915. She survived the Great War but was sold almost immediately afterwards, in 1919. – The image of HMS Halcyon, seen here not long after her launching, is from the Wikipedia web-site.*



The posting of seaman Marsh to HMS *Halcyon* was to last only six weeks. What his duties may have been during that period appears not to have been recorded – at least, not among his own papers. At the outset of the *Great War*, in August of 1914, she, the ship, had become the ship of the Senior Naval Officer North Sea Fisheries, located at the fishing centre of Yarmouth, to serve off England's east coast under the orders of the Admiral Commanding Coast Guard and Reserves.

He was then dispatched to the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta where the Royal Navy had multiple facilities and a large base centred around the Grand Harbour of the capital city, Valetta.



(Right: *The image of the Grand Harbour, Valetta, seen here just prior to the Great War is from a vintage post-card.*)

Once again, the dates recorded of his posting are perhaps misleading as he left *officially*, transferred from *Halcyon*, on December 23 of 1915, to join *Egmont* on the next day, Christmas Eve. However, it is a long way from the east coast of England to Malta, thus exactly when he reported there *to duty* is not at all clear. These days were logically to include those on which he was to travel.

HMS *Egmont* was the shore-based establishment at Valetta from which British naval operations were directed during the *Great War*. As can be seen from a glance at a map of the area, Malta is a position of great strategic importance; this also implies that a great amount of naval activity was to emanate from there, up to and even after the *Second World War* until the island became independent in 1964.



HMS *Egmont* was in fact a castle known as the *Fort Saint Angelo* which formed a part of the fortifications which still encircle the harbour, defensive constructions built some four hundred years before when the island was a possession of the *Knights of the Order of Saint John*.

(Right above: *A part of the Fort Saint Angelo complex in Valetta's Grand Harbour as it still exists – photograph from 2011*)

On the service records of Seaman Marsh the name of a presumed ship appears in parentheses adjacent to that of HMS *Egmont*; this usually signifies the name of a vessel on which he would have served while stationed in Malta. However, that almost indecipherable name – *Terrosin?* – is not that of any ship to be found on the Navy lists.

Whatever the identity of the mystery vessel, it would appear that nothing of an extraordinary nature took place on board her during this period: Seaman Marsh is recorded as having been attached to HMS *Egmont* (or a ship under *Egmont's* control) from December 24, 1915, until June 30 of the following year, 1916.

From the above date, June 30, 1916, until October 30 of the following year, 1917, Seaman Marsh is next documented as having been attached to two of the Royal Navy's shore-based establishments: from that July 1 until February 9 of 1917 he was nominally attached for a second time to *Pembroke I*; immediately subsequent to this he was transferred to *President III* – of which more further below.

Found next to the entry of *Pembroke I* among his papers is an entry of two words: *Demobilized...and...Remobilized*, this suggesting that during the above-documented period, Seaman Marsh was on furlough for some of this time. And such appears to have been the case:

Seaman Marsh is recorded as having disembarked from the White Star Liner *Northland* on December 1, 1916, in the English port-city of Liverpool. He had been one of a detachment of seventy-eight Newfoundland Naval Reservists which had taken ship in Quebec City some twelve days prior. Many of these men, as was the case with Seaman Marsh, had just concluded a month's furlough at home\*.



(Right above: *The image of the SS 'Northland' – called by its Dutch name 'Zeeland' until it was deemed to be too German-sounding – is from a vintage post-card. – from the [history.earthsci.carleton.ca](http://history.earthsci.carleton.ca) web-site*)

*\*Travelling to Quebec from Newfoundland was not an altogether straightforward procedure in those days, but it was a journey undertaken by a goodly number of Reservists during the war-time years: the first leg was the trans-Island crossing from St. John's to Port aux Basques, often taking more than twenty-four hours; there followed the overnight voyage across the Cabot Strait to North Sydney where the ship apparently more often than not docked at about six o'clock in the morning; and the final stage was to be another elongated journey by train, usually on the Inter-Continental Railway reported further above, from North Sydney to the detachment's destination at Quebec City, about four days in all.*

Once having arrived back in the United Kingdom, Seaman Marsh is reported as having returned to duty to *Pembroke I* for some further ten weeks before his transfer, as seen above, to *President III*.

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This last above-mentioned Royal Navy establishment had initially been located in London where the original – floating – *President* had been opened in 1862 to serve as a drill-ship for recruits of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. *President III*, however, was not a vessel but one of several Divisions to emerge as the *Great War* progressed and was to deal primarily with ships’ finances and accountancy, its offices at times located outside the capital city.

(Right below: *During the period of Seaman Marsh’s posting to HMS President III, the sloop HMS ‘Buzzard’ had taken on the mantle of HMS ‘President’ although whether or not Seaman Marsh would have set foot on her deck – or even seen her – is not clear. – photograph from Wikipedia)*

What Seaman Marsh’s duties were to be at *President III* is not documented among his personal papers and it is perhaps doubtful that he were particularly involved in *President III*’s financial and accounting activities. From various sources, however, it appears that the Division was at least partially responsible for the posting of seamen to, for the most part, merchant vessels which may have been in need of the seamanship that Royal Navy personnel could offer.



It is suggested in his records that October 31 of 1917 may have been the date on which he joined – or was ordered to join – the ship *Rio Verde*.

She had begun her life as the four-thousand ton *Austriana* in 1901, having been built for the *Furness Withy Company*. In 1915 she was sold to London-American Trading Company Limited and her name changed to *Rio Verde*.

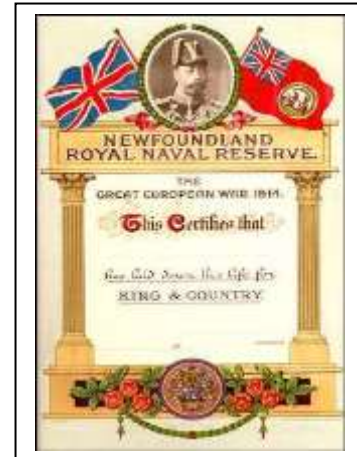
On February 21 of 1918 the vessel was en route from Milford Haven in Wales to Glasgow with a cargo of coal. It was the *U-boat 100* that torpedoed her (not *U-86* as apparently recorded in some sources) as she passed some seven kilometres out to sea from the *Mull of Galloway*, the southernmost point of Scotland on that country’s west coast.



The *Rio Verde* sank and twenty lives were lost, at least four of whose bodies were recovered and which lie alongside Seaman Marsh.

**NB:** *The family information which follows has been assembled piece-meal and may not be correct as confirmation had been difficult to acquire.*

(Right above: *The sacrifice of Seaman Marsh is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the Anglican Churchyard in the community of Trinity. – photograph from 2011?)*



(continued)

The son of Arthur William(?) Marsh (also found as *Mesh*) and of Sarah Ellen (?) Marsh (née *Soper?*) of Dunville, Trinity Bay – at the time of his enlistment – he was also older brother to Beatrice, Norman, Arthur, John, Theodore, Walter (born in October of 1917) and to Lionel.

(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 Walter Marsh is documented as having *drowned* at the reported age of twenty-six years of age in the loss of the steamer SS *Rio Verde* on February 21 of 1918: date of birth in Dunville, Newfoundland (but perhaps in *Deer Harbour*), November 12, 1892 (from his enlistment papers only).

*Seaman Marsh served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada – only seconded to ‘Niobe’ - as is cited in some sources notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.*

Seaman Walter Marsh 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.