

MURRAY, J.



Seaman James Murray, Number 1446x, 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, likely as a fisherman, and having travelled from the Trinity Bay community of Heart's Content to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on December 4 of 1914 James Murray reported...*to duty...*at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same early December day he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on for war-time service and underwent the required medical assessment at the same time. James Murray 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.)*



(continued)

***\*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.***

***(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)***



***(continued)***

**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 below: 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)**

**A mere two weeks less a day after having been...taken on strength...at 'Calypso', his sparse Service Records suggest that it was on December 17, having perhaps on the same day been promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit, that the now-Seaman Murray was on his way to the United Kingdom.**

**He was to be one of a draft of one-hundred fifty-three Naval volunteers to board the steamship *Mongolian* in St. John's Harbour for passage across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The ship sailed for the Scottish port-city of Glasgow at four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day.**



**(Right: Built in 1891 for use by the 'Allan Line' for the transport of emigrants from Europe to North America, 'Mongolian' was a slow vessel with a speed of just twelve knots and was, by 1914, becoming obsolescent. She was nevertheless to be bought in 1914 for use by the Admiralty and remained in service until July 21 of 1918 when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – photograph from the British Home Child Group International web-site)**



**\*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.**

**As seen above, Glasgow was to be the destination of Seaman Murray's draft. Upon disembarkation the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training – or simply to await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part situated around the coast in southern England.**

**In the case of Seaman Murray, the destination was to be *Victory I\**, Royal Navy shore-based facilities at almost the other end of the country, although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned HMS *Victory* is not clear.**

***HMS 'Victory', like most of the so-called stone-frigates (naval establishments on shore), was three entities: it was a training establishment originally, and also a holding-barracks for seamen not only in training but awaiting a posting, its facilities initially set in the naval city and port of Portsmouth\*; thirdly, it was also the ship to which the majority of the land-based personnel would have been, at least officially and bureaucratically – if not physically - attached\*\*.***

***At Portsmouth this vessel was HMS 'Victory', the warship from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although her illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.***

***\*The large influx of personnel due to the War necessitated further Divisions and functions being transferred to other areas of the United Kingdom.***

***(Right: HMS 'Victory' in dry dock in the southern English port-city of Portsmouth where she has been for a century – photograph from Wikipedia)***



***\*\*Naval discipline differed in some ways from civil and even Army law, and those in naval uniform, even though based on land and perhaps never to go to sea, had to be on the books of a real ship for that discipline to be applied. Thus a normally small, obsolescent and obscure vessel – 'Victory' was the exception - was used for this purely bureaucratic purpose.***

**Seaman Murray was to serve at *Victory I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until August 19 of the following year, 1915. Some five months into this period, on May 6, he had been transferred, at least on paper although he remained at *Victory I*, to the Royal Naval Reserve *Trawler Section*, there to serve as a Deck Hand.**

**HMS *Magpie* was an elderly craft, a gunboat launched in 1889. In August of 1914, at the onset of the *Great War*, she was to be employed as a boom defence vessel on the River Solent which flows in front of the port-city of Portsmouth before emptying into the English Channel. It was a body of water of strategic importance to the Royal Navy.**

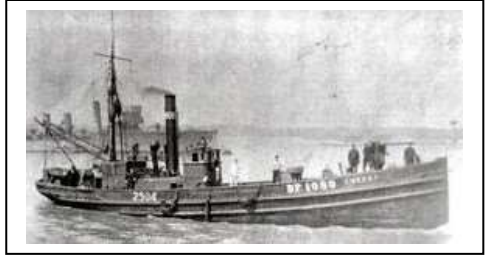
**Seaman Murray was attached to *Magpie*, perhaps or perhaps not to the ship itself as she was to become a depot ship in October of that 1915. This meant that she was to be responsible – administration, supplies and fuelling, personnel, pay etc. - for a number smaller boats, usually hired, bought or requisitioned fishing-vessels, which were employed locally for coastal defence. *Magpie* would also have been the overseer – and the name - of any facilities on land attached to the operation.**



***(Right above: The Redbreast-Class gunboat, HMS 'Sparrow', armed with six four-inch guns, was a sister-ship of 'Magpie'. – the photograph is from Wikipedia)***

Seaman Murray was soon to be at work on two of the above-mentioned smaller boats.

The first was an eight year-old hired drifter, *Holly*, of some ninety tons which had been armed with a single quick-firing six-pounder gun and worked as a mine-sweeper. He would be a crew member on two occasions, from December 9 of 1915 to May 14, 1916, and again from July 1, 1916 until January of 1917.



(Right above: *The Royal Navy Drifter 'Cheery', of the same class as both 'Holly' and 'Unity III' - all of which were to survive the conflict - the photograph showing a small gun mounted on her fore-deck – photograph from Wikipedia)*

(Right: *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)*



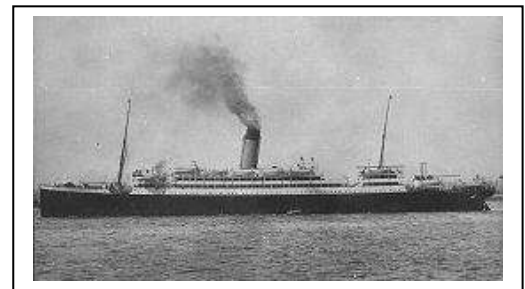
Between the aforesaid two periods spent on *Holly*, Seaman Murray was to work on *Unity III*, also a hired drifter of the same ilk but armed with a smaller weapon, a quick-firing three-pounder. *Unity III*, like *Holly*, was also used for mine-sweeping.



(Right above: *A photographic example of the type of afore-mentioned 3-pounder gun as mounted on Unity III – from Wikipedia)*

Daily routines, both on shore and at sea, appear to have been the only activities undertaken by Seaman Murray during that year of 1916, at least judged from the paucity of the information available pertaining to the war-time careers of the two drifters. And they both survived the conflict.

While Seaman Murray was serving the final days of the year 1916 at HMS *Magpie*\*, the naval authorities had been deciding that his time in service since 1914 was deserving of a month's furlough back in Newfoundland. He was thus assigned trans-Atlantic passage on an armed merchant cruiser, HMS *Laurentic*.



He was not to travel alone. A number of other Newfoundland naval reservists, having by this time been deemed worthy of a month's leave at home, were to travel – likely to Halifax or Québec – on her.

(Right above: *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)*

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***\*Although his Service Record documents him as being at HMS 'Magpie' until January 25, several of the preceding days must have involved preparation and the subsequent train journey from southern England to the port of departure in the north-west (and see below).***

The ship was to sail from Birkenhead, a port adjacent to Liverpool, on that January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five\* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which to buy munitions in North America.

***\*While it is recorded that 'Laurentic' was carrying no passengers or troops, it should be remembered that some of those on board were returning home for leave or for repatriation.***

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in Lough (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) Swilly to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o'clock on that same afternoon *Laurentic* was under way again.

She then passed through the protective boom at the entrance to Lough Swilly and gathered speed – it was apparently for her speed that she had been chosen to carry the gold as she could out-run most ships and any U-boat. She was barely three kilometres from the coast when she struck two German mines in quick succession and rapidly began to sink; nor after the second explosion was there any power and thus no distress signal could be sent.



There was little time to lower the life-boats although apparently all on board *Laurentic*, apart from perhaps some engine-room personnel who were already dead, were able to board them. It was to do them little good.



A snow-storm was blowing and most of the men were not clothed to resist it. Any help had to travel the length of the Lough and then through open seas to reach them. Apparently the nearest land could only be reached in the teeth of the gale that was blowing, a wind reckoned to be at minus twelve degrees, and the boats were filling with water.

And those that eventually managed to land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, un-inhabited coast of Donegal.

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(Previous page: *The Memorial to those who perished on that January 25 of 1916 during the sinking of HMS 'Laurentic'; and the churchyard of St. Mura of the Church of Ireland at Upper Fahan, Ireland, wherein stands the aforesaid Memorial and where many of the dead lie to this day – photographs from 2011*)

Little wonder, perhaps, that of the four-hundred seventy-five on board *Laurentic*, three-hundred fifty-four were to die.

(Right below: *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 son of John Murray, fisherman, and of Margaret Murray (perhaps deceased at the time of his enlistment as a line is scored through the word *Mother* on his papers) of Heart's Content, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, he is documented as having only a single...*Brother working*.

There would appear to be no other pertinent information a propos Seaman Murray's family in the sources available at this time.

Seaman James Murray was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty years: date of birth in Heart's Content, Newfoundland, October 26, 1896 (this date from only his enlistment papers).



*Seaman Murray 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 James Murray was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to 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.