

O'BRIEN, P. J.



Seaman Patrick Joseph O'Brien, Number 2172x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Patrick Joseph O'Brien relinquished his occupation as a fisherman working out of Witless Bay and travelled to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, there on November 4 of 1914 to report...*to duty**...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same November 4 he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's* war-time service and underwent a satisfactory medical assessment He also likely attested at this time, 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.*)



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

Following a mere two weeks of training* in St. John's, Seaman O'Brien, 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 19th, its reservist passengers un-mentioned in the local newspapers.



(Right above: 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 waived by ‘Royal Proclamation’.***

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 O’Brien 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 it 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 base and holding-barracks for regular seamen and it was likely *Pembroke I* to which Seaman O’Brien 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 O’Brien would have worn an HMS ‘Pembroke’ cap-band – until he joined ‘Clan McNaughton’.

(Right above: 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)

The ship to which Seaman O’Brien was ordered on December 10-11 of that same 1914 was HMS *Clan McNaughton*, reportedly at Liverpool on December 4, likely the port from where she was to sail on patrol with the 10th Cruiser Squadron some days before that Christmas.

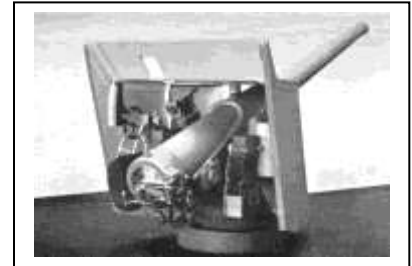
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(Right: *The image of Clan MacNaughton – with unfortunately no further details - is from the Royal Marines History.com web-site.*)



The vessel, a passenger-cargo ship of the *Clan Line*, had been hired by the British on November 19 of that autumn and had been fitted out with eight 4.7 inch naval guns for the purpose of serving as an armed merchant cruiser.

But although a number of Newfoundland reservists had been sent upon arrival in the United Kingdom to train at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy's gunnery school, Seaman O'Brien had not been among them and he was posted to *Clan MacNaughton* to likely serve as an ordinary seaman.



(Right: *An example of the naval gun with which Clan MacNaughton had been equipped prior to sailing on her war-time duties. – from Wikipedia*)

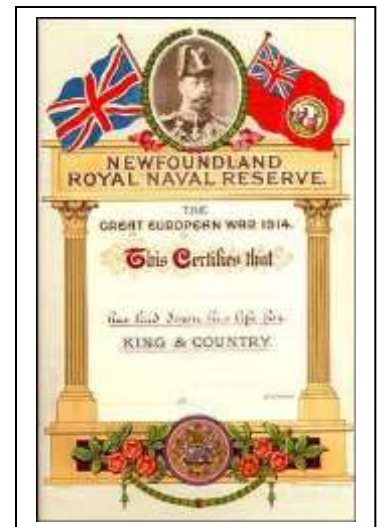
Clan MacNaughton was to be attached to the 10th Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force originally having comprised out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-cargo ships fitted with guns, some as elderly as a number of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.

The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling – and certainly not prepared - for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this these vessels had to patrol the area of stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

Even so, the first several weeks of her service appear to have been uneventful and *Clan MacNaughton* apparently was to return to Liverpool on one if not two occasions before setting out to sea once again on what was to be her last voyage*.

**It appears not to be recorded whether she was in the company of 'Viknor' when that vessel left the Squadron to return to Liverpool in mid-January, not to be seen again before her discovery on the ocean floor almost a century later.*

The weather during that part of the winter of 1914-1915 was apparently foul and the last message from *Clan MacNaughton*, sent by radio by her captain on February 3, was that the ship – on patrol off the north coast of Ireland and west of the Hebrides - was in...*terrible weather.*



She was not heard from again.

The cause of her loss has never been ascertained: she may simply have been the victim of the weather as reported by her captain; or perhaps, as originally thought, she had encountered a German mine although apparently the vessel was not particularly close to a mine-field.

A third theory suggests a combination of circumstances: the weather, perhaps a top-heavy ship because of the eight naval guns that she was carrying (just more than two tons per gun), and an inexperienced crew all may have contributed to her loss.

(Preceding page: A Memorial Scroll, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life serving in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve)

The son of Richard J. O'Brien (former fisherman, deceased of consumption on May 13, 1915) and of Matilda O'Brien (née *Norris**) – to whom he had allotted a daily fifty cents from his pay - of Witless Bay in the District of Ferryland – although it appears that the young family had for a while been resident in St. John's at 208 Water Street - he was also brother to Michael-Gregory**, to John, to Ann and likely to Richard Jr..

**The couple was married in St. John's on June 2 of 1891.*

Seaman O'Brien died on February 3, 1915, at the *recorded* age of nineteen years: his date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, February 8, 1896, is from his enlistment papers.

Seaman O'Brien 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 Patrick Joseph O'Brien was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



***His brother Michael Gregory O'Brien had enlisted at the declared age of eighteen years in July of 1916 and had travelled overseas in August of that same year. He had joined the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment just prior to Christmas some fourteen weeks later.*

Wounded on April 14 of 1917 at Monchy-le-Preux, Private O'Brien (Number 2968) was transferred to England to be hospitalized. He re-joined his unit in Belgium on August 28 and was to be wounded once more on October 9 at the Broembeke during one of the offensives of the Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele.



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Again hospitalized in England, Private O'Brien was to cross the English Channel to return to the Continent and...active service...towards the end of February. He was now to serve for fifty-two days before being wounded yet again and ordered back for medical care to England for a third time.

It was to be on October 1 of that 1918 that he reported...to duty....back to the 1st Battalion of the by-then Royal Newfoundland Regiment to be a part of what was to prove to be the final advance of the Great War.

Private Michael Gregory O'Brien was reported as having been...killed in action...on October 25, 1918, while serving with 'A' Company during fighting near the Belgian villages of Vichte and Ingoyghem. This was to be the 1st Battalion's last engagement of the Great War; on the morrow the Newfoundlanders were to march away from the Front for the last time.

The full story of Private Michael Gregory O'Brien's service during the Great War is to be found elsewhere among these files.

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.