

PHILLIPS, R.



Seaman Robert Phillips (found also as *Philips*), Number 1441x, 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, he thereupon travelled from the Trinity Bay community of Burgoyne's Cove to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on December 3 of 1914, Robert Phillips reported... *to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same December day he enlisted into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's war-time service* and underwent the required medical assessment. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

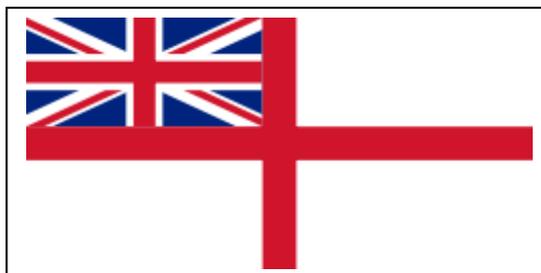
(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior 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.

(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)

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 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)

Fourteen days* after having first reported to Calypso in St. John's, on December 17 – at this point having been promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit – the now-Seaman Phillips was 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 on that same afternoon, the departure of the Reservists un-noted by the local press.



SS Mongolian

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

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

In the case of Seaman Phillips, the destination was to be HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy Gunnery School and its adjacent facilities just off-shore from the south-coast naval port-city of Portsmouth at almost the other end of the country.

**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 above: *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.

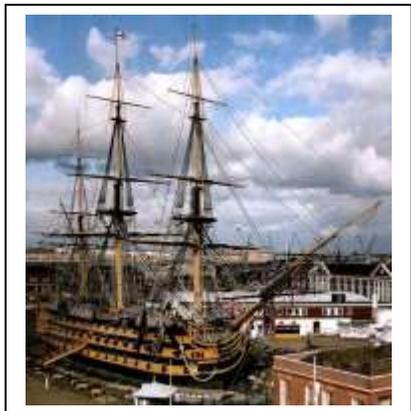


(Right: *The Royal Navy Memorial stands on the coast at Portsmouth from where may be seen Whale Island – photograph from 1917*)

Which is why Seaman Phillips would soon have been wearing an HMS *Excellent* cap-band.

After several weeks of learning how the Royal Navy’s armaments worked, Seaman Phillips was then placed on the books of the nearby HMS *Victory I* on January 29 although for exactly how long - or even if he was to remain in Portsmouth – appears not to have been recorded – but it was likely for some seventeen days.

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 to one of His Majesty’s ships, 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**.*



(continued)

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.**

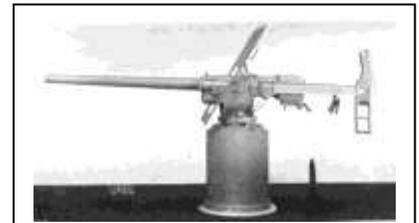
(Preceding page: HMS 'Victory' in dry dock in the southern English port-city of Portsmouth where she has been for a century – photograph from Wikipedia)

****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.**

As seen above, Seaman Phillips was to be posted to *Victory I*, one of the several Divisions of *Victory*, each specializing in some way from the others – *Victory II*, for example, trained stokers and other engine-room personnel. *Victory I* was dedicated to the training of seamen or, if they were already trained as was the case of Seaman Phillips, it was, as also seen above, a holding-barracks where he was now to stay for those above-mentioned seventeen days...perhaps (but *officially* until February 17).

On that date he was transferred – at least on paper – to *Victory II* from where he was to join HMT *Othonna*.

His Majesty's Trawler *Othonna* was a vessel of less than two-hundred tons built in 1899 which before the War had worked out of the Welsh fishing-port and town of Milford Haven. She had been converted for war-time service, armed with a single twelve-pounder naval gun and also a six-pounder quick-firing weapon, and put to work as a mine-sweeper in January of 1915.



(Right above: A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss 6 pounder gun such as would have been mounted on the fore-deck of the trawler 'Othonna' – from Wikipedia)

***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.**



On this first occasion Seaman Phillips was to spend no more than four days on board *Othonna* – from February 18 to 21, 1915 – before he was dispatched to join another ship, an elderly sloop built in 1876, launched as *Wild Swan*, become *Clyde* in 1904 for use as a naval drill-ship, and then *Columbine* in 1912 when she was then to work as a harbour service ship and base ship to the 3rd and 14th Destroyer Flotillas.

(Right above: The photograph is of 'Penguin' of the 'Osprey-Class' and thus sister-ship to 'Columbine'. – from Wikipedia)

To join his ship, however, Seaman Phillips was ordered to travel to Scotland since HMS *Columbine* was stationed to serve as home and headquarters to the *King's Harbour Master* at the all-important Royal Navy base and dockyard at Rosyth on the Firth of Forth and sited on that body of water almost opposite the Scottish capital. He is documented as having been on *Columbine's* nominal roll from February 22, 1915, until March 3 of the following year although what his duties comprised during this period appears not to have been recorded anywhere in his scant personal file.

There is now an unusual void in the records: the Royal Navy habitually knew where all its personnel was posted – at least on paper – at any specific time. But in Seaman Phillips' record there is a lapse from the above March 3, after having been discharged from *Columbine*, to April 1 of that 1916* when it would appear that he returned to *Victory II* and subsequently to his former ship, the trawler *Othonna*.

**It sometimes happens that during a period of this duration the personnel has been granted a period of furlough to return home. Thus far, however, in the case of Seaman Phillips, the author has not been able to find any evidence for this.*

It was at this time that Seaman Phillips' presumed training at HMS *Excellent* in December-January of 1914-1915 was to result in him being appointed as gunner on board *Othonna* – but whether to serve the six-pounder gun shown further above or on the twelve-pounder (the weight of the projectile), twelve cwt (twelve-hundred pounds the weight of the barrel and breech) naval gun is not clear – perhaps both.



(Right above: *The photograph of the naval twelve-pounder gun was taken in the Royal Artillery Museum, 'Firepower', at the Woolwich Arsenal in the year 2010. Unhappily, it has since closed.*)

An incomplete record suggests that Seaman Phillips was to serve with *Othonna* from May 1 of 1916 until April 20 of the next year, 1917, a period of a year less ten days.



It was apparently to be a year without incident other than the daily routines of service.

(Right above: *Another similar hired trawler, 'Miura', of two-hundred fifty tons built in 1911 is seen here on war-time duty – her gun on the fore-deck - in the North Sea. She was to go into service in February of 1915 and would be lost some six months later, also to a mine. – photograph from the wrecksite.eu web-site via Google*)



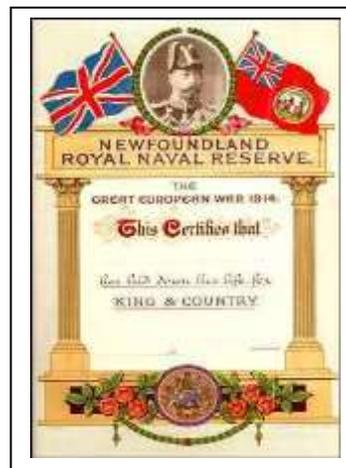
(Right above: *Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the Great War: these were for the most part contact mines. – from the NavWeaps web-site*)

HMT *Othonna* seems to have spent at least a part of that year based in Scotland, perhaps by this time attached to the above-mentioned base at Rosyth. Given the importance of that location as a major station for units of the *Grand Fleet* in particular and of the Royal Navy in general, the protection of the entrance to the *Firth of Forth* was a significant consideration.

Othonna was not to operate alone in her patrolling and sweeping of the approaches to the *Firth*. On April 20 of 1917 she was reportedly one of six such vessels working in the area. Some days prior to this there had also been a German submarine doing likewise, except that U-boat UC-41 had been sowing mines rather than reaping them and *Othonna* duly struck one of them off Tod Head, Fife Ness.

The small craft sank rapidly. How many men were on board her at the time is not clear, perhaps only nine. If that is so, then the entire crew was lost.

(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)



The son of William Phillips, fisherman, and of Elizabeth Berrigan (née *Gardner** also found as *Gardiner*), of the Trinity Bay community of Burgoyne's Cove, Smith Sound, he was also brother to Eliza-Ann, Mary-Hannah, Elinda-Grace and to Levi.

*The couple was married in the Parish of Trinity on December 23 of 1879.

Seaman Robert Phillips was recorded as having died, as reported above, on April 24, 1917, in the sinking of HMT *Othonna* at the reported age of twenty-nine years although his date of birth in Burgoyne's Cove, Newfoundland, is cited in his enlistment papers as having been December 22, 1893.



(Right above: The War Memorial in the Trinity Bay community of Burgoyne's Cove honours the sacrifice of Seaman Robert Phillips. – photograph from 2012(?))

Seaman Phillips 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 Robert Phillips was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) and 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.