

PUDDICOMBE, W.



Seaman William Puddicombe, Number 2136x, 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 seaman/fisherman, and likely having then travelled from Cook's Harbour on the Straits of Belle Isle, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on August 10 of 1916 William Puddicombe reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).



On that same August day of 1916, he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for the...*Duration of the War*...and underwent the required medical assessment on the morrow. He also most likely was to attest 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.



A branch of the senior service from Britain's oldest colony. Naval reservists before leaving Newfoundland to serve in the Empire's cause.

(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)



(Right: The C-Class cruiser 'Calypso' of 1916, seen here on an un-recorded date during the later years of the Great War, was to be sunk by an Italian submarine in 1940. – from *Wikipedia*)

Thirteen weeks and five days after having been...taken on strength...at 'Briton', his sparse Service Records suggest that it was on November 14, having by that time been promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit*, that the now-Seaman Puddicombe was on his way to the United Kingdom.

The Discharge Register of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) records that it was on the *Reid Newfoundland Company* ship, the *SS Sagona* that he, Seaman Puddicombe, and the others of his draft were to leave St. John's for the United Kingdom and for overseas service.

However, local newspapers report that while the vessel was to sail on that date with one-hundred fifty passengers on board, it – and they – were to travel directly by sea only as far as North Sydney* from where the naval reservists were then obliged to travel by train via Halifax to the Canadian port-city of Québec.

**Where the ship was to be for the next while, going back and forth to Port aux Basques.*

Transport to the United Kingdom for the one-hundred twenty-eight Newfoundland naval reservists – although as was often the case, they were identified as Canadians – and their (presumed) officers, was to be provided by the *White Star* liner, *Northland*, which had originated its voyage from Montréal and was on its way to Liverpool on England's west coast.



Northland arrived there on December 1 of that 1916.

(Right above: '*Northland*' was originally the Belgian ship '*Zeeland*', but her German-sounding name obliged the war-time British owners to change it to the more expedient '*Northland*'. Employed for a while as a troop-ship, in August of 1916 she recommenced her commercial runs, carrying military personnel whenever the situation presented itself. – photograph of a peace-time *Zeeland* in 1906 from Wikipedia)

On December 1 of that 1916, *Northland* having docked in Liverpool, 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 Puddicombe, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *Vivid I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until likely the end of the third week of January of the New Year, 1916 – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned *HMS Vivid* is not clear.

**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 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.

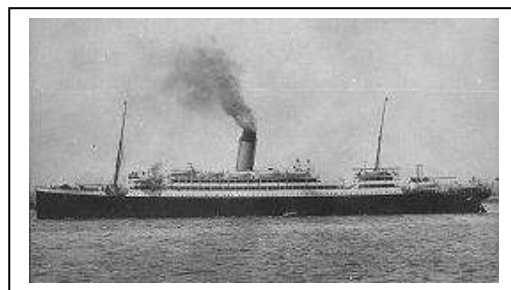
HMS Vivid, the base to which Seaman Puddicombe had been ordered after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on shore, but also a small, elderly, nondescript depot ship (originally HMS 'Cukoo', built 1873), to which all the naval personnel was attached and was the name to be emblazoned on the bands of their caps.

These establishments were at times divided into sections: 'Vivid I' was the holding-barracks where the seamen (as opposed to the engine-room personnel, for example, in 'Vivid II') such as Seaman Puddicombe were to be stationed while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.



(Right: A main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport – photograph from 2011(?))

When Seaman Puddicombe's attachment to a ship had been decided, it was to be to an armed merchant cruiser, HMS *Laurentic*. A number of Newfoundland naval reservists, having by this time been deemed worthy of a month's furlough at home, were to travel – likely to Halifax – on her and at the same time.



(Right: 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)

Such, of course, was possibly not the case of Seaman Puddicombe since he had arrived in the United Kingdom only as late as December 1, only eight weeks prior to the sailing-date of HMS *Laurentic*. It is more likely that he was sailing on her as a working member of the crew rather than as a sailor going home on leave.

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 Bunrana in 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.



(continued)

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.

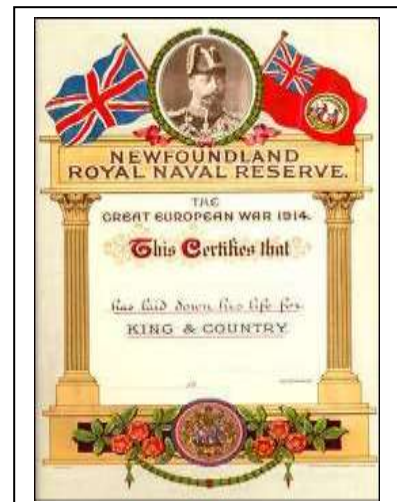
And those that eventually managed to land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, uninhabited coast of Donegal.



(Preceding page and right above: *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.

The son of Frederick Puddicombe, fisherman, and of Annie Puddicombe of Cook's Harbour on the very northern extremity of the island of Newfoundland (but also see below). It has proved more than difficult to find any further information a propos William Puddicombe's family.



(Right above: *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)*



(Right above and right: *The sacrifice of William Puddicombe is honoured on both the new and old War Memorials in the community of St. Anthony. – photograph from 2020)*



Seaman William Puddicombe 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 Cook's Harbour in (at the time) the District of St. Barbe, Newfoundland, May 14, 1889 (this date from only his enlistment papers) although the Newfoundland Death Register gives the year of his birth as 1890 and the venue as Stanhope, Lewisporte, in the District of Twillingate.

Seaman Puddicombe 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 William Puddicombe 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.