



Seaman Charles Ralph, Number 706x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Charles Ralph had originally presented himself for enlistment on December 11 of 1910, whereupon he was to undergo twenty-eight days of training, until January 7 of the year following.



As with the majority of pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years and was to undergo the required annual training of twenty-eight days on at least four occasions during the following thirty-seven months. November and December of 1913 saw his final term of service on *Calypso* before the events of the summer of 1914 dictated that he be called to war-time service.

Summoned from home *to service* at some time after the onset of hostilities, Charles Ralph travelled from his family residence on Flat Island, Bonavista Bay, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on October 13 of 1914 – more than two months after the British *Declaration of War* – he was once again to report...*to duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that above-mentioned October 13, Charles Ralph was signed on for wartime service\* and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.



**(Preceding page: 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 in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site, taken in or about 1935.)**

**\*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 at a minimum.**

**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.**



**An elderly vessel, H.M.S. '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.**

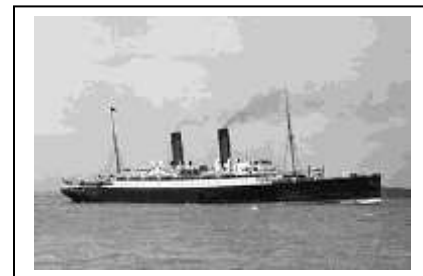
**(Preceding page: H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – photograph by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)**



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

**Following less than a month of duties in St. John's – no further training has been recorded – Seaman Ralph, one of a draft of three-hundred five Naval Reservists, embarked on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner Franconia on its way serving its commercial route from New York to Liverpool.**

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



**Once having arrived in the port-city of Liverpool on November 11, it appears that several of the men were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases only hours later.**

**(Right above: A relatively new vessel, 'Franconia' had been launched on July 23 of 1910. Remaining un-requisitioned as a troop transport until early 1915, it was to be well over a year later that on 4 October, 1916, while heading for Salonika, she was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine to the east of Malta She was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – photograph from Wikipedia)**



**On an unspecified mid-November day, Seaman Ralph was...taken on strength...at HMS Excellent, the Royal Navy gunnery school by then located on Whale Island at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth. He was to train there until December 11 when he was ordered to join his ship, HMS Viknor, likely destined to serve one of the guns with which by that time the ship had been fitted.**



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

*\*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'.*

*(Preceding page: Drill on a naval gun on 'Whale Island' during the period of the Great War – from Wikipedia)*

The Armed Merchant Cruiser *Viknor* was an elderly ship, obsolete and apparently under-powered with a top speed of only fourteen knots. In her earlier lives she had firstly been, as of 1888, the SS *Atrato*, before then having been re-named as the SS *Viking* in 1912. Upon the outbreak of the *Great War* in 1914 she had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty and baptized on that third occasion as HMS *Viknor*.

*(Right below: The elderly luxury cruise-liner 'Atrato' seen here in her pre-War condition and before she was to be requisitioned for naval service – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*

At the time of Seaman-Gunner Ralph's transfer to *Viknor*, the ship was apparently based on the River Tyne. She was not to leave port until December 28 and not to join her squadron (see below) until January 1. She had been armed by that time although the type of weapon that Seaman Ralph was to serve appears not to have been documented.

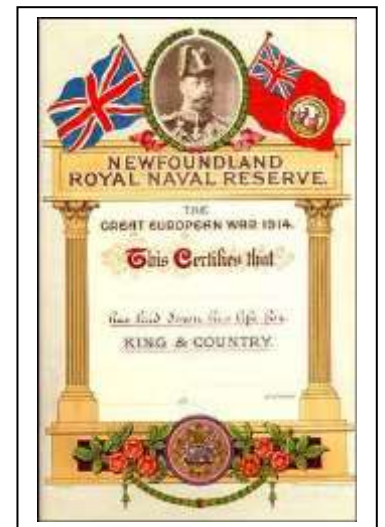


'*Viknor*' was to be attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force originally having comprised out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had proved unequal to the elements and had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-liners carrying a few guns, those at times as old as – or more than - the ships on which they were mounted.

The ships of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, although armed, were not spoiling 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 stormy waters encompassed by northern Scotland, Ireland and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

In early January the ships of the *Northern Patrol* stopped a Norwegian vessel, the *Bergensfjord*, and transferred a number of persons, one of them a suspected spy, to *Viknor*, she then being ordered to proceed to Liverpool.

*(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)*



(continued)

From what is known about *Viknor*, she was hardly a vessel fit for the task at hand and January and February of 1915 were to apparently be particularly stormy. What is more, a German counterpart, the steamship *Berlin*, had recently been reported in the area sowing mines – one of which had already sunk the British battleship *Audacious* some three months before.

It still remains a mystery as to what happened to *Viknor* although it appears to be that either she fell victim to the bad weather or that she was sunk by a mine. All that may be sent with any great certainty is that there was not to be a single survivor: of the crew of three-hundred two, including twenty-five of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), all were to perish\*.

*\*Her wreck was found off the coast of County Donegal, Ireland, in the year 2006, but no conclusion was to come about as to the cause of the ship's sinking.*

The son of Stephen Ralph, fisherman, and of Leah Ralph (also née *Ralph*\*) of the Bonavista Bay community of Flat Island, he was also younger brother to Mary-Ann.

*\*The couple had married on Flat Island on October 1 of 1888.*

Seaman-Gunner Charles Ralph died on January 13 of 1915, at the reported age of twenty-four years: date of birth on Flat Island, Bonavista, Newfoundland, July 20, 1891, (from Royal Navy records), but found as July 23, 1892, in the Newfoundland Birth Register as well as Newfoundland Vital Statistics – although the last-mentioned is likely a copy of the Register.

(Right: *The sacrifice of Seaman Charles Ralph is honoured on the War Memorial in the community of Eastport. – photograph from 12013*)

*Seaman Ralph 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-Gunner Charles Ralph was entitled to the 1914-15 Star, as well as to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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.