Seaman Raymond MacDonald (perhaps not *Maxwell* as found in some sources) Roberts, Number 2538x is buried in Greenwich Royal Naval Cemetery on the outskirts of London alongside some of those who fought at *Trafalgar*.

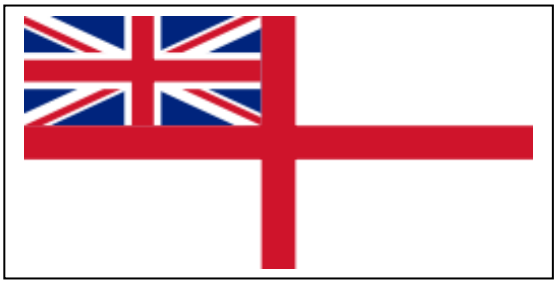
Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities, Ray MacDonald Roberts, fisherman, travelled from his recorded home in the District of Twillingate to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on June 21 of 1918, he reported…*to duty…on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).**

Having undertaken no prior service in the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Ray Roberts enlisted on that June 21. He was likely to have undergone a satisfactory medical assessment at the same time and to have been signed on for the *Duration of Hostilities*. And it would also have been about this same time that he pledged 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.

(Preceding page: *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.


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*)

As recorded above, 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.

(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*)

(Preceding page: *The newly-constructed 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)

Now, more than two years after *Calypso* had become *Briton*, and almost four years following the British Declaration of War on August 4 of 1914, Seaman Roberts was to be on his way to the United Kingdom. His Service Record sees him having been officially transferred on July 16 of that 1918*, the day that he and twenty-eight other Newfoundland Reservists boarded the express train to cross the Island of Newfoundland.

At this time the Great War was far from over and victory was even farther from being assured. On land the Germans had advanced in their recent offensives even further than they had during the earlier years of the conflict, and at sea, even though the convoy system had been introduced a year earlier, the U-boats were still active and the High Seas Fleet was an omnipresent threat. And while it is true that the Americans had declared their participation in the War in April of 1917, their numbers in Europe were as yet relatively small and they were still dependent on the French and British for artillery and airplanes.

Elsewhere of course, while the British were successfully countering the Turks in the Middle East, the Russians had retired from the fighting and the Italians had suffered a massive defeat at the hands of the Austrians at Caporetto.

The *Reid Newfoundland Company* train arrived at the terminal at Port aux Basques late in the day on the morrow, July 16. From there his detachment was to board the ship *Glencoe* for the short journey across the Cabot Strait to arrive at North Sydney, Cape Breton, at just after four o'clock in the morning of July 17.

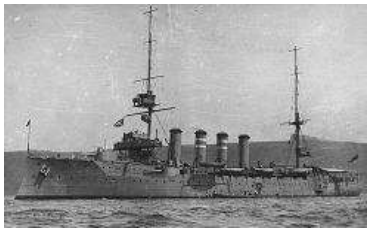
(Right above: *The photograph of the Reid Newfoundland Company ship, the SS 'Glencoe', is from the Captain Harry Stone Collection, via the Maritime History Archive web-site*.)

Having complied to all the formalities required by the Canadian authorities – not to forget that Newfoundland was a foreign country as far as Canada was concerned…And vice versa! – Seaman Roberts and his comrades-in-arms boarded another train which, the *Glencoe's* passenger list informs the reader, was to transport them to the port of Halifax.

What then came to pass appears not to be clear. On July 20 a convoy was to sail from Halifax to the United Kingdom but whether transport-ships for military and naval personnel formed a part of it has been difficult to ascertain.

While his Service Record documents that Seaman Roberts was officially attached to HMS *Pembroke I*, a Royal Navy shore-based establishment (see below), from July 16, 1918, until December 8, the day of his death, his gravestone at Greenwich shows that he had, during at least some of this time, officially been at least nominally serving *on the strength* of the elderly armoured cruiser HMS *Roxburgh* (but see final page below).

(Right below: *The elderly Devonshire-class cruiser was undertaking convoy duties during the last year of the War and had arrived in Halifax from the United Kingdom on July 17, likely on the same day as Seaman Roberts*. The photograph of the ship is from the *naval-history.net* web-site.)



We shall deal first with HMS *Pembroke I*, the naval facility to which he was attached on July 16, 1918, immediately upon his discharge from HMS *Briton* in St. John's. Thus his travel days from Newfoundland to the United Kingdom were to be recorded as service at *Pembroke*.

HMS *Pembroke was the Royal Navy establishment at the town of 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 base and quarters for regular seamen and it was to *Pembroke I* that Seaman Roberts would be ostensibly attached following his arrival in the United Kingdom 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.

(Right above: *A part 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)

Now on to HMS *Roxburgh*.

The ship had arrived in Halifax on that July 17 – as likely had Seaman Roberts - and was to remain there until August 5 when she sailed to escort a convoy eastward, most of the vessels to arrive in Liverpool some ten days afterwards, on August 15.

Although once in Liverpool, on August 16 she did discharge eighty-three seamen of the Royal Naval Reserve – Newfoundland is not specified – to depot.

In the meantime another convoy had sailed from Halifax on July 20, it to arrive in the United Kingdom eleven days later but, once again, whether or not the Newfoundland Reservists were on board one of the ships – or if so, which one - is information that thus far has proved to be elusive.

(Right below: *This photograph of a convoy at sea during the Great War is from the web-site of the Canadian War Museum*.)

During the four months or so that followed, HMS *Roxburgh* was to make four further crossings of the Atlantic, two in each direction with the port of Quebec City by this time included in the itinerary. However, while *Roxburgh* was back in port at Liverpool-Birkenhead in mid to late August for eight days and in early October for another sixteen, there is no documentation of any Naval Ratings departing to or arriving from HMS *Pembroke.**

Twelve Ratings reported on August 18 from Devonport but this was the land-based facility of HMS 'Vivid'…not 'Pembroke'.

Unfortunately the log-book of HMS *Roxburgh* ceases on November 30 of 1918, twelve days after the ship had again returned to the English west-coast port complex of Liverpool-Birkenhead. During that last crossing from Halifax-Quebec, on November 11, the day on which the Armistice came into force, there had been nineteen patients on her sick list. By the time the vessel docked on November 18, that number had dwindled to a dozen.

This is mentioned because, of course, this was the time when the pandemic of the so-called *Spanish 'Flu* was beginning to evolve and also *by* which time a number of troop transports arriving from North America – including some with re-enforcements for the Royal Newfoundland Regiment on board – had become plague ships.

This, apparently, from the evidence cited above, was not the case of HMS *Roxburgh* – the number had dropped to five by November 20, the final day on which these numbers were recorded – but then, he must have caught the disease somewhere.

The presence of Seaman Roberts still not having been established, there is yet the possibility that it had been intended that he join the ship's complement on the next voyage and that even though he was already on *Roxburgh's* nominal roll, he had not yet set foot on her deck.

(continued)

The suggestion that this may have been the case is to be found on Seaman Roberts' Death Certificate. On that piece of paper – in fact, on an electronic copy of it which may be found on the *Grand Banks Genealogy* site – it is recorded that his death came at a time when he had been posted to serve at the Submarine Cable Depot (also referred to as the *General Post Office Cable Yard* in his hospital report) in the area of the old Woolwich Dockyard.

(Right above: *The building which apparently dates from 1882-1883 was originally a part of the General Post Office submarine cable depot. In four circular cast-iron tanks were stored, under water, submarine cables until such time as they were to be placed on board cable-laying ships. The site is on the not particularly pre-possessing Warspite Road in the former Woolwich Dockyard in south-east London.* – photograph from the *Wikimedia Commons* web-site file: *2018, Woolwich, Warspite Road, former Woolwich Dockyard*)

The son of Robert Samuel Roberts, light-keeper, and of Lavinia Roberts (also née *Roberts) of Long Point, Twillingate, Newfoundland, he was also brother to John-T., Bernice, Clayton, Lloyd, William-Harris, Elizabeth and to Robert-MacDonald (died at the age of one year).**

The couple had been married on January 25 of 1889 in the community of Twillingate.

(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: *The sacrifice of Raymond Roberts is honoured on this plaque affixed to the outer wall of the Old Methodist Church in the community of Twillingate*. – photograph from 2015)

(Right below: *This family memorial which stands in Twillingate North United Cemetery commemorates the life and the passing of Ray Maxwell Roberts R.N.R. (but see below)*. – photograph from 2015)

Seaman Ray Roberts was reported as having died of 'flu and the ensuing pneumonia on December 6, 1918, the same day on which he was admitted – and while under the care of a Doctor Duckworth - in the *Dreadnought Seaman's Hospital*, Greenwich (from his medical report), although other sources (including the memorial pictured at right) cite the date as December 8: the date of birth of Ray MacDonald Roberts at Long Point, Twillingate, is recorded as December 3, 1895, in the Newfoundland Birth Register – as is the name MacDonald.

Seaman Roberts 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 Ray MacDonald Roberts was entitled solely to the British War Medal for his *overseas service.**

****The fact that he was not eligible for the Victory Medal strongly suggests that Seaman Roberts was not to have served on 'active service'; thus he was likely not to have crewed on HMS 'Roxburgh' while the ship was on convoy duty.***

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 19, 2023.