

SPARKES, SAMUEL



Seaman Samuel Sparkes, Number 2047x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having answered the call to volunteer from the naval authorities, he thereupon relinquished his occupation in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on March 24 of 1916, he reported...*to duty*...*on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton* (ex-*Calypso*), moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same March 24 he enlisted into the Reserve, was signed on to serve for the...*duration of the conflict** and also underwent the required medical assessment. Samuel Sparkes also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

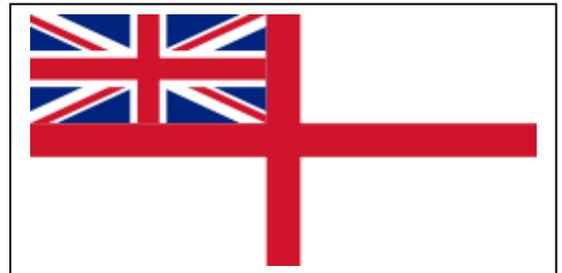
(Right: George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior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

Seaman Sparkes' scant personal file documents him leaving for service overseas on or about April 23-24, 1916, thirty days following the formalities of enlistment and they also have him promoted from the rank of *Seaman Recruit* on an unrecorded date during this same period.

The records show that Seaman Sparkes was struck off the books of HMS *Briton* by the above-mentioned April 23 of that 1916 and transferred to the nominal roll of *Vivid I* (see below) on the following day, April 24. Thus a certain number of the days attached to *Vivid I* were not spent at all at *Vivid* but on a ship crossing the Atlantic from Newfoundland to the United Kingdom.



That ship was the SS *Pretorian*, an *Allan Line* ship – the Company, if not the vessel itself, well-known in St. John's – which since 1904 had been running the commercial route between Glasgow and the Canadian ports of Québec and Montréal, and had perhaps

deviated from it to embark the naval reservist draft on that occasion. The vessel sailed from St. John's en route to the United Kingdom on or about that April 23, 1916.

(Preceding page: This un-dated photograph of the 'Allan Line' ship SS 'Pretorian' in the 'Prince's Dock' in the Scottish City of Glasgow is from the web-site 'Tangled Roots and Trees' in which it is shown by courtesy of the Graham Lappin Collection.)

If the experience of previous reservists was then followed, once the draft with which Seaman Sparkes was to travel had landed in the United Kingdom – was it in Glasgow? - several of the men would have been posted directly to a ship. Others would have been ordered to undergo further training – or simply to wait - at various Royal Navy establishments mostly around the coast of southern England and thus, likely having journeyed by train, they likely reported to these bases on or about May 2 or 3.

As seen above, Seaman Sparkes' destination was to be HMS *Vivid I**, a Division of the Royal Navy port and facilities at Plymouth-Devonport on the south coast of England and almost at the other end of the country from Glasgow.

**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 and a holding-barracks for seamen awaiting postings during the Great War), Chatham, and Portsmouth for example, were terrestrial facilities 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 Sparkes 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 cap.

These establishments were at times divided into sections: the holding barracks at 'Vivid I' was where the seamen (as opposed to engine-room personnel, for example, who were sent to 'Vivid II') such as Seaman Sparkes were likely initially to be stationed – as well as potential signallers and telegraphers - while awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.



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

After a delay of fifteen weeks which he served at *Vivid I* – this including the time spent traversing the Atlantic -, Seaman Sparkes was dispatched on August 7 of that same year to *HMS Attentive III*.

The coastal town of Dover lies on that part of the English coast which lies closest to France and the port-town of Calais. The Dover Straits, some thirty kilometres wide, allow vessels from the Baltic sea, from northern Europe and from the North Sea to have access to the English Channel – or La Manche as the French call it – and from there the Atlantic Ocean. Today it is the world’s second busiest waterway – and it was already critical to British interests at the time of the Great War.



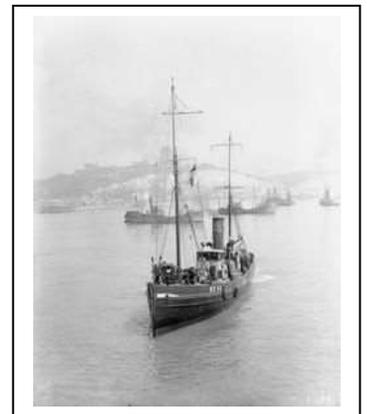
Even some seventy years prior to that conflict the British had seen fit in the mid-nineteenth century to construct a harbour for commercial, for cross-Channel and for naval reasons. The port of Dover today is the main maritime link between the United Kingdom and the continent – and the more recently-constructed ‘Chunnel’ (Channel Tunnel) passes almost directly underneath it.

(Right above: One of the entrances to the port of Dover as seen from the Dover Straits with, flanking it to the right, the well-known White Cliffs – photograph from 2010)

With the Germans having occupied a part of the Belgian coast almost opposite Dover and with a goodly number of British vessels, both commercial and naval – to which should be added the troop transports which from there and from nearby Folkestone were, by the end of the War, to have carried some five million troops across to the Western Front – using the aforementioned waterway, the British created the ‘Dover Patrol’.

The biggest fear was that the Germans would employ U-boats and torpedo-boats based on the Belgian coast to attack British shipping, and would also set mines in those waters. In fact they did although it was the mines that were to become the greatest threat to shipping.

Thus began the ‘Dover Patrol’. In its early days it was a motley collection of old, even obsolete war-ships, for the most part destroyers, to which was very soon to be added a number of requisitioned and purpose-built small vessels, notably fishing-boats, trawlers and drifters, lightly-armed but capable of mine-sweeping and keeping their German opposite numbers at bay.



(Right above: Armed trawlers of the ‘Dover Patrol’ in the harbour at Dover – The undated photograph is from the Imperial War Museum web-site.)

(continued)

The ‘Dover Patrol’ rapidly became a large and important entity of Britain’s naval defences and vessels from it were to be stationed not only at Dover but at other points around the nearby coast*. Its base came to be known as HMS ‘Attentive’.

***HMS Ceto was the facility at nearby Ramsgate where several Newfoundlanders serving in ships of the ‘Dover Patrol’ were based.**

The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with HMS *Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base’s parent ship* and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser, to which Seaman Sparkes was to be at first attached in that August of 1916.

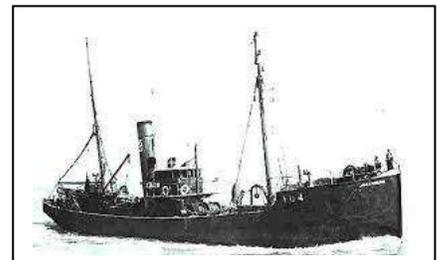


(Right above: HMS ‘Attentive’, seen here at some time prior to the Great War during which she served as a cruiser of the Dover Patrol. The base reportedly was named ‘Attentive’ after her appointment as the parent ship when her Commanding Officer became senior officer of the Dover Patrol itself. – photograph from Wikipedia)

What exactly his duties were to be at that time on *Attentive III* does not appear to have been documented on the less than single page of Seaman Sparkes’ service record.

***The nominal depot ship was a trawler, ‘Seaward Ho’. (It is all a little complicated and possibly a bit unnecessary for the recounting of Seaman Sparkes’ story).**

When exactly it was that Seaman Sparkes set foot on the deck of a second ship of the *Dover Patrol* appears not to have been recorded.



But when he did, it was apparently onto the trawler *Dagon* that he stepped. She was a requisitioned (*Admiralty Number 3202*) hired trawler* of some two-hundred fifty tons, having been built in 1914 and registered in the east-coast fishing-port of Grimsby as GY. 957. Converted for war-time use she had been armed with a single twelve-pounder gun and had come into service in June of 1915.

Dagon’s duties appear not to be recorded in her record, but trawlers typically served as patrol ships, as mine-sweepers, and as inspection ships as well as salvage and rescue vessels when the necessity arose.



(Right above: The image of a peace-time ‘Dagon’ is from the maritimearchaeologytrust web-site via Google.)

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

(Right: A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) and twelve hundred-weight (1200 lbs. the weight of the barrel and breech) gun, here seen adapted for use in 1941. – photograph taken at the Royal Artillery Museum ‘Firepower’ at Woolwich in 2010)



**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.*

The fact that Seaman Sparkes’ Service Record does not record the time he spent on HMT *Dagon* unfortunately means that the amount of prize and/ or salvage money which he may have earned while serving on her at sea cannot be estimated:

In World War 1, Royal Navy warship personnel still received Prize Bounty Money for the sinking or capture of enemy ships. Warships and auxiliaries also received Salvage Money for saving ships, cargoes and ship's boats. – Gordon Smith, Creator of Naval-History.net

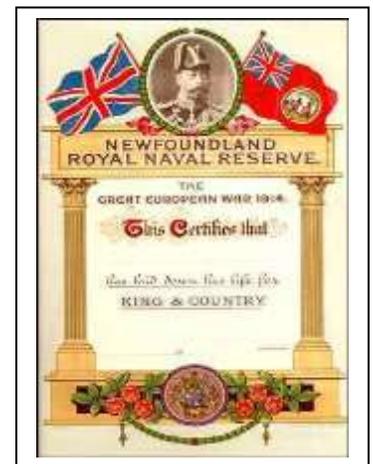
All that can be found pertaining to the above-cited monies are records of family members of the lost crew of *Dagon* receiving various amounts after their death with the loss of the ship. The most recent incident had been the ship *Angelica Maersk* salvaged on the 22-23 of that November of 1916, but even though the event occurred only some sixteen days prior to the sinking of HMT *Dagon* it seems impossible to confirm Seaman Sparkes’ presence on board *Dagon* at the time.

Neither is it apparently known whether his widowed mother received any of his due - if indeed he had been present at that operation.

On December 8 of that 1916, while at sea off the south-coast town of Eastbourne in the county of Sussex, and close to the Royal Sovereign Light-Ship (a floating light-house) *Dagon* sank after an explosion, with the loss of all of her twelve-man crew. There was at the time the consensus that the trawler had struck a mine but apparently since then – and most recently – it appears to be considered that she was the victim of a torpedo fired by a U-boat*.

**If so, it would also appear that she was the only trawler to be lost in this manner in the ‘Dover Patrol’ area during the entire war-time period.*

The son of Ebenezer Sparkes (also found as *Sparks*), former labourer deceased from influenza on February 23 of 1901, and of Susannah Mary Sparkes (née *Cook** and later *Janes* after re-marriage) of Moore Street (in 1898) before Carter’s Hill, both addresses in St. John’s, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Eliza, William-Frederick, Ida-Jane, John-Charles and reportedly to three more siblings.



(continued)

**The couple had married on December 27, 1881, likely in St. John's. Susannah Sparkes re-married on November 10, 1902, in St. John's to Henry Janes.*

Seaman Sparkes drowned on December 8 of 1916 in the loss of His Majesty's Trawler *Dagon* at the *reported* age of nineteen years. However, the *Gower Remembers* web-site cites his age at the time as seventeen years and eight months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, April 10, 1897 (from his enlistment papers).

(Preceding page: 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)

Seaman Sparkes 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 Samuel Sparkes was entitled to the British War Medal (centre) and to 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 20, 2023.