

AYLES. A.



Seaman Alexander Ayles, Number 1697x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

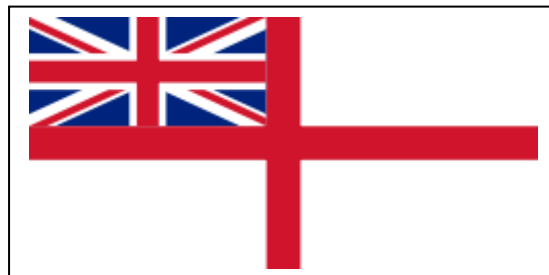
Having travelled from Bonavista to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on February 16 of 1915 Alexander Ayles, likely a fisherman, reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS Calypso, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same February 16 he enlisted for the first time 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 on the morrow. 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.)



****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.***

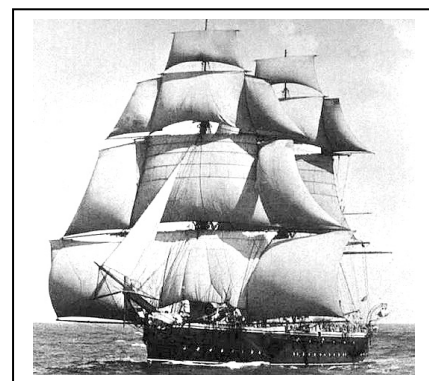
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion 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 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.

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.



(Preceding page: *HMS '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. – Royal Navy photograph from 1898 by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum*)

Following thirty-two days of training and service in St. John's and by that time having been promoted on March 16 from the rank of Seaman Recruit, Seaman Ayles is recorded as having left St. John's for overseas service in the United Kingdom on March 20 in the draft of seventy-one reservists which left for Halifax on board the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* with 'D' Company of the Newfoundland Regiment, from there to take ship on the ocean-liner *Orduña* for trans-Atlantic passage*.

**'D' Company of the Newfoundland Regiment was on its way to Scotland to join the Newfoundland contingent already serving there at Edinburgh Castle.*

(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*)

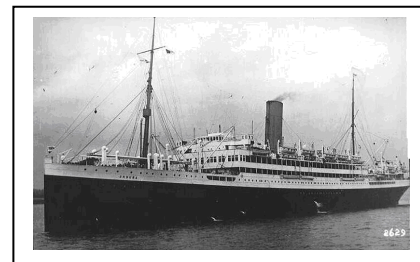
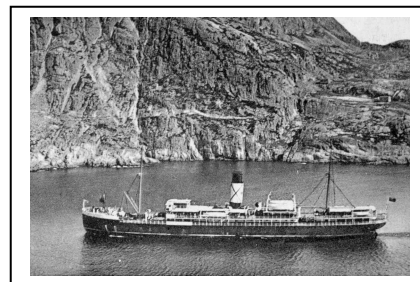
Once having disembarked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool it appears that several of the Naval men were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about March 30. In the case of Seaman Ayles, the destination was to be *Victory I* established in the south-coast port-city of Portsmouth.

(Right above: *The photograph of 'Stephano' sailing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right above: *The recently-built 'Orduña' – constructed in 1913-1914 - was requisitioned during the Great War for use as an armed merchant cruiser and also as a troop transport. Involved with the unfortunate Jewish refugees in the 'Voyage of the Damned' affair, the vessel was later also to be used as a troopship and an evacuation transport during the conflict of 1939-1945 before being finally laid up in 1950. – photograph from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*)

**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.*

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The Navy's training establishments were for the most part on land: Devonport (although apparently it was 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.

Thus, HMS 'Victory', the base to which Seaman Ayles had been ordered after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on shore, but also HMS 'Victory' the warship, the vessel from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although the ship's illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.

It was also the name which all the sailors attached to HMS 'Victory' were to have emblazoned on the bands of their caps.

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

(Right: HMS 'Victory' is seen here in dry dock in the southern English naval port-city of Portsmouth where she has been since the late 1920s – photograph from Wikipedia)



Seaman Ayles was to serve at *Victory I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until May 11-12 of 1915. During this period, on or about May 4-5, he was transferred to the above-mentioned *Victory II* for a short tem of only six days, this the *Trawler Section of the Royal Naval Reserve*, there to serve with the rank of *Deck Hand*.

It is not at all clear when he was to join the crew of His Majesty's Trawler *Semnos*: it was either for those few days' posting to *Victory II* or it was upon being subsequently ordered dispatched, on May 11-12, 1915, to be attached to *Attentive III*, the name assigned to the trawler apparently used at the time as a depot and parent ship – like *Victory* above at Portsmouth - in the port of Dover, and which was responsible for the organization of other vessels of the *Dover Patrol of which *Semnos* may have been one.**

***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.**

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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: 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.)

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

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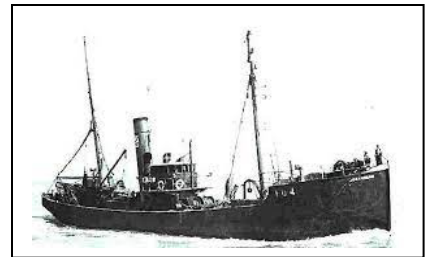
The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with HMS *Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base's parent ship* and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser – or the also further above-mentioned trawler - to which Seaman Ayles was to be attached in that month of May of 1915.

(Preceding page: 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 after she became the parent ship because her Commanding Officer was to become senior officer of the Dover Patrol itself. – photograph from Wikipedia)

What exactly his duties were to be during that posting to *Attentive III* does not appear to have been documented on the single page of Seaman Ayles' service record.

**As seen above, the nominal depot ship was a trawler,. (This is all a little complicated and possibly a bit unnecessary for the recounting of Seaman Ayles' story).*

Neither is to be found among the documents when exactly it was that Seaman (Deck Hand) Ayles reported to *Semnos* – if indeed he did.



(Right above: The image of a vessel similar to HMT 'Semnos', the trawler 'Dagon' in peace-time, is from the [maritimearchaeologytrust](http://maritimearchaeologytrust.com) web-site via Google.)

But if and when he did it was apparently onto *Semnos*. She was one of the many trawlers requisitioned by the Admiralty, Number 1195, during the *Great War*. Built in 1914, she was a vessel of two-hundred sixteen tons which had been registered as A. 18 in the Scottish port of Aberdeen. Having been re-fitted and armed with a single three-pounder gun for wartime work, she came into service in March of 1915 as a minesweeper, a duty which continued until the year 1920*.

(Right: *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)*

**Some twenty years later she played the same role during the Second World War.*

Seaman (Deck Hand) Ayles may have served on *Semnos* for some or all of the period from May 12 to June 30 of that year, 1915.



He was then ordered to report to *Vivid II*, or more likely to the naval holding-barracks which were part of the Royal Naval facility and establishment on the English south coast at Plymouth-Devonport where seamen were to await the summons...*to duty*...on board another of His Majesty's ships.

September 7-8, 1915, was to see that moment come for Seaman Ayles when he was to be dispatched to a base whose identity has proved uncertain although the available evidence may suggest that it was HMS *Colleen* – which the author will now presume it to have been.

As was the case with *Victory* at Portsmouth, *Attentive* at Dover and with *Vivid* at Plymouth-Devonport, there were two *Colleens*: one was a vessel of that name which was at the time the depot ship and administrative centre for the war-time naval base of the same name, located at Queenstown (today *Cobh*, pronounced as *Cove*) on the southern coast of Ireland*; the other *Colleen*, of course, was the base itself.

**Ireland at the time of the Great War was a British possession and one of the British Isles. It was to be during the period between the two World Wars that the country became the independent nation that it is today.*

Queenstown – named as such in 1849 for a visiting Queen Victoria – had already by that time been an important naval base since the Napoleonic Wars and was to remain so during the remainder of the years of British sovereignty. As one might surmise, it lost none of that importance during the years of the *Great War*.

As with most of the other vessels which shared their name with a shore-based establishment – *Pembroke*, *Vivid*, *Ceto* etc., HMS *Colleen* was not to venture out into the perils of the high seas. But there was a number of smaller vessels operating out of Queenstown for whom the depot ship was responsible in such matters as financial expenditure – crew's wages for example - personnel, supplies, armaments et al..



(Right above: HMS '*Royalist*', seen here before becoming HMS '*Colleen*', was a hybrid corvette – both sail and steam – built in 1883, and was in many ways similar to HMS '*Calypso*' (later '*Briton*'), the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve training-ship. – photograph from Wikipedia)

It is not recorded in his files whether Seaman Ayles was at any time to work on board the base ship HMS *Colleen*, but although the exact day once again has gone undocumented, he was on some unspecified date to join the crew of one of those afore-mentioned *smaller vessels*.

The ship on which Seaman Ayles was to serve during the following fifteen months was His Majesty's Trawler *Filey* and that this period was between September 8 of 1915 and December 21 of the following year, 1916.

Filey, like Seaman Ayles' former ship, *Semnos*, was a steam-trawler, Number 1363, built in 1914 and requisitioned and hired by the Admiralty. A ship of two-hundred twenty-six tons, once re-fitted and armed with a single twelve-pounder gun she was put into service as a patrol vessel in March of 1915.

**During the War, 1456 such vessels were requisitioned from ports around the British Isles and even elsewhere; two-hundred sixty-four of them were to be lost.*

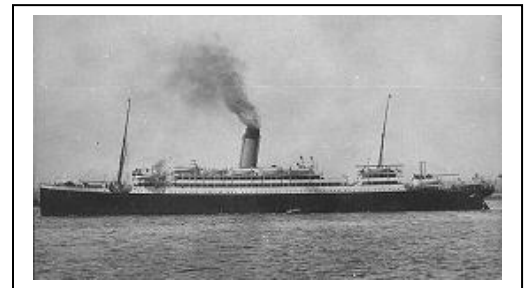
(Right below: A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) and twelve hundred-weight (1200 lbs. the weight of the barrel and breech) gun, here seen adapted for use in 1941. – taken at the Royal Artillery Museum ‘Firepower’, Woolwich, in 2010)

Whether or not *Filey* was ever to fire that gun in anger has not been recorded as the one single incident occurring during her war-time career which was to draw the attention of the author of her brief biography was not military in nature. On October 2 of 1916 she was driven ashore by high winds and seas in Camusmore Bay, Tory Island, just off the coast of County Donegal. No lives were lost.



The wreck was abandoned until the following year when she was salvaged to be re-acquired by the Admiralty a year later again.

Whether Seaman Ayles was on board *Filey* at the time appears not to have been recorded. Two months later on December 21 he left this posting and on December 22 was nominally on the books of HMS *Pembroke*. He had been granted leave back to Newfoundland and likely travelled during that last-mentioned period to meet the armed merchant cruiser which was to carry him homewards: HMS *Laurentic*.



The ship was to sail from Birkenhead, a port adjacent to Liverpool, on January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold to buy munitions in North America.

(Right above: 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)

***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 on leave.**

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Bunclraha in Lough Swilly (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o’clock on that same afternoon she was under way again.

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; to add to the difficulties, after the second explosion there was no power and thus no distress signal could be sent.

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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 on the rocky, barren, uninhabited coast of Donegal.

(Right above 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 James Ayles, fisherman, and of Mary Ayles (née *Squires**) of Bonavista, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Clara, Elizabeth-Jane, George and to Augustus*.

**The couple was married in Bonavista on December 12, 1881.*

(Right: *The War Memorial in the community of Bonavista honours the sacrifice of Seaman Alexander Ayles. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



Seaman Ayles was documented as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of the year 1917 at the age of twenty-eight: his date of birth in Bonavista, Newfoundland, June 7, 1888 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) – although Royal Navy Records cite the date as having been June 28 of the same year.

(Right: *This family memorial to the memory of Seaman Alexander Ayles stands in the United Church grounds in Bonavista. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



Seaman Ayles served the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as found in some sources, notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman-Gunner Alexander Ayles was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



****His brother Augustus had enlisted immediately before Alexander as his number, 1696x, suggests, and had then reported to HMS 'Calypso' on February 16, 1915, to be examined medically as had his brother on the following day.***

His brother Alexander and he likely then took ship to the United Kingdom together where both were ordered to report to 'Victory I' and then 'Victory II' before being transferred as Deck Hands to the Trawler Reserve.

(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)

On May 5 Seaman Augustus Ayles was transferred to 'Attentive III' to serve with the Dover Patrol although there appears to be no information of any subsequent ship to which he may have been attached. It was a posting which was to last for some ten months, until April 10 of 1916.



On the day following, April 11, he was transferred bureaucratically back the Newfoundland and to HMS 'Briton' (ex-'Calypso'), although when he was to take passage to home is not altogether clear. Once there he is recorded as having been employed on a...'shore engagement'...although, once again, no further details appear to be available.

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 22, 2023.