



Seaman Arthur

William Baggs, Number 2239x, seaman, is buried in the United Church Rink Road Cemetery, in the community of Twillingate.

Having relinquished his occupation, likely as a fisherman, and likely having then travelled from Bluffett Cove (also found as Bluff Head Cove), Twillingate, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on October 27 of 1916 Arthur William Baggs reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS Briton, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same October 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 October 28, 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.*)

**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.

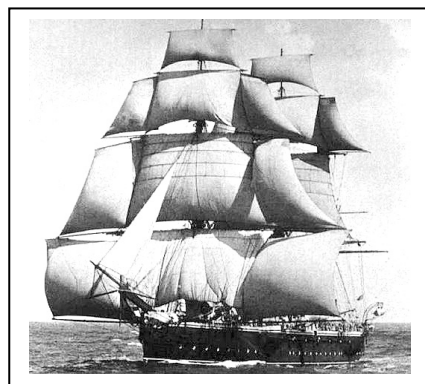
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Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the 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.

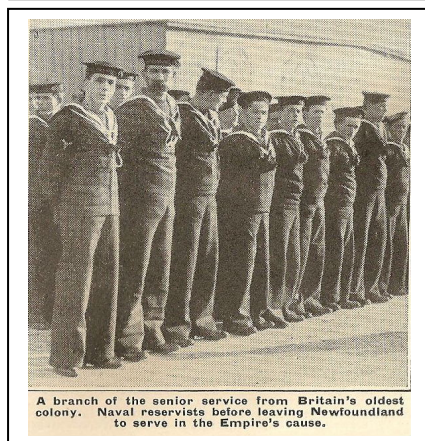
(Right: HMS 'Calypso' is seen here in full sail. The vessel was to be re-commissioned HMS 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – The Royal Navy photograph dated 1898 is by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum)



Nineteen 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 Baggs was on his way to the United Kingdom.

***It appears that in many cases, even if the recruit in question had not already previously been with the Royal Naval Reserve, the required twenty-eight day training period, all or partially, was waived by 'Royal Proclamation'.**

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 Baggs, and the others of his draft were to leave St. John's for the United Kingdom and for overseas service.

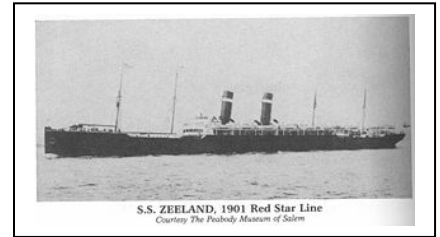


(Right above: Naval Reservists from Newfoundland at some time during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)

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 Newfoundland Naval Reservists were then obliged to travel by the Inter-Continental Railway 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 north-west coast.



Northland arrived there on December 1 of that 1916.

(Right above: ‘Northland’ had originally been the Belgian ship ‘Zeeland’, but her German-sounding name had 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 vessel 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 Baggs, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *Pembroke I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until reportedly the twelfth day of March of the following year, 1917, although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned HMS *Pembroke* has not been made clear.

****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.

Seaman Baggs, as noted above, was to remain on the nominal roll of *Pembroke I* until mid-March of 1917, on which date he was transferred to a second shore-based naval establishment, *President III*.



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(Preceding page: 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)

Even though Seaman Baggs had spent seventeen weeks less two days on *Pembroke I's* books – this included the days at sea on *Northland* – it would appear that by the time he was transferred to *Pembroke III* he had not set foot on any ship of the Royal Navy. And if the records are to be believed, this was also to be the case during the time – a mere two days – that he was to be on the strength of *President III*.

**The service records of Seaman Baggs pertaining to the period encompassing his service of these weeks at both 'Pembroke I' and 'President III' include the words 'Demobilized' and 'Remobilized'. In other records they at times suggest that the seaman in question had been granted furlough – usually for a month – at home. However, in the case of Seaman Baggs, any evidence to support this has thus far proved to be more than elusive.*

The last above-mentioned Royal Navy establishment had initially been in London where the original – floating – *President* had been opened to serve as a drill-ship for recruits of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. *President III*, one of several Divisions to emerge as the *Great War* progressed, was to deal primarily with ships' finances and accountancy, its offices at times located outside the capital city.

After only those very few days attached to *President III*, he had been transferred on March 15-16 back to the *Royal Navy Barracks* at Chatham – the home-town of HMS *Pembroke* – to again likely await a summons to a ship.

He was still to be there at the time of a German air raid which was to killed over one-hundred naval personnel including four of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve.

Seaman Baggs, the four afore-mentioned Newfoundlanders and their unfortunate comrades-in-arms had been billeted at Chatham at a time when there was apparently some over-crowding and so the Drill Hall with its glass roof had been requisitioned for use as a supplementary dormitory*.

**Whether the Drill Hall was where Seaman Baggs had been billeted at the time is not clear.*

This was now the beginning of the period when the Germans were to send their large *Gotha* bombers over England during the night-time. On the night of September 3-4 the towns of Chatham and Gillingham, both naval communities, were the selected targets, the bombers' job apparently made easy by the absence of a blackout and any anti-aircraft activity.



(Right above: This photograph of the glass-covered Drill Hall at the Chatham Royal Naval Barracks in or about 1905 is from the 'campus.medway.ac.uk > history' web-site.)

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There had apparently been some nine-hundred men accommodated in the above-mentioned Drill Hall at the time. The damage was done by two bombs and by the glass roof having been transformed into flying projectiles by the explosions.

The *sussexhistoryforum.co.uk*. article from which this present information is drawn cites that ninety men had been killed at the time and that a further forty had been expected to die of wounds in the aftermath.

(Right: *The image of the funeral procession of September 6, 1917, is also from the above-noted 'sussexhistoryforum.co.uk.' article.*)



A mass funeral was undertaken on September 6 for the majority of the dead to be interred in *Woodlands Cemetery*, at nearby Gillingham, with several more later buried once they had been identified.

Seaman Baggs was to remain at *Pembroke I* for a further fifty-three days following the funeral of September 6 before being transferred up the east coast of England to the Humber River whose defence was the responsibility of a number of smaller bases which by 1917 had become known collectively as *HMS Wallington*.

He was officially placed on the nominal role of that assortment on October 30. As it appears that he was not assigned to any of the small craft attached to any of the bases, it may be – but is not certain - that he was simply dispatched to the coastal fishing-port of Grimsby where the Naval Officer Commanding *HMS Wallington* was stationed, there to be at his disposal if and when necessary.

Seaman Baggs was to remain on *HMS Wallington's* books for ten weeks less a day, until January 7, 1918, when he was returned to *Pembroke I*. This tenure was not to be of a long duration and it was possibly during this time that it was decided that he be posted back to Newfoundland.

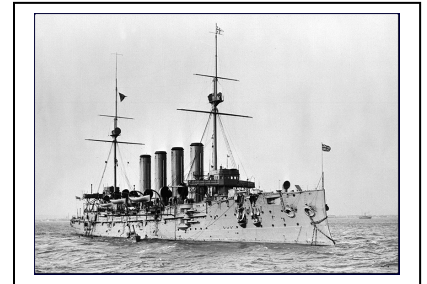
The records have Seaman Baggs on *HMS Pembroke's* books until February 23, forty-six days hence and then on *HMS Briton's* books on the morrow, but this may well have been an official date with his physical return not having been for a further twelve days or so since he may have been obliged to travel via Halifax or even St John, New Brunswick* to reach Newfoundland.

**It must be remembered that Halifax was at this time still operating at a reduced capacity as a result of the catastrophic explosion of December 6 of the previous year and that Saint John was being used as an alternative.*

At the end of May, Seaman Baggs was to be posted to Halifax having been seconded to the Royal Canadian Navy and to the Headquarters' Ship of the east coast forces, *HMCS Niobe* which, despite the disaster of the previous December, had continued its operations in that port during and since that time.

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The ship, an elderly cruiser, had been ceded to the fledgling Canadian Navy in 1910 by the British. Having served with the 4th Cruiser Squadron in the early years of the *Great War* – with a hundred Newfoundland Reservists seconded to provide a part of her crew – she had thereupon been retired to become the Depot Ship of the Royal Canadian Navy in Halifax Harbour for the remainder of the conflict.



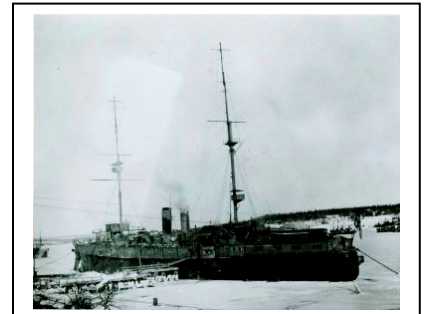
(Right: *The photograph of Niobe seen here at anchor is from a Canadian Government web-site.*)

Some six months prior to Seaman Baggs' official attachment to *Niobe*, there had occurred in Halifax Harbour an event as horrendous as anything else that may have been experienced during the war-time years: the *Halifax Explosion**.

**On December 6 two ships, the Norwegian Imo and the French Mont Blanc had collided, as a result of which the Mont Blanc had caught fire. She was laden with explosives and the subsequent explosion - reportedly the largest man-made explosion in history up until that time – had devastated both the port and the city itself. More than seventeen-hundred had been killed and nine-thousand hurt.*



The down-town and the waterside areas of the city were devastated and to add to the misery of the now-homeless, a major winter storm was unleashed upon them on the following day.



(Right above: *A view of an obliterated Halifax with its harbour in the distance, the photograph taken two days after the incident. – from 'Wikipedia'*)

(Right above: *'Niobe' had sent one of its boats to the aid of 'Mont Blanc' before the ship exploded; when she did, all of the boat's crew were killed, as were some of those on board 'Niobe' itself – with several more hurt. 'Niobe' was damaged in the blast but was able to continue her functions in a diminished manner. – The photograph of a damage Niobe is from the Canadian War Museum web-site.*)

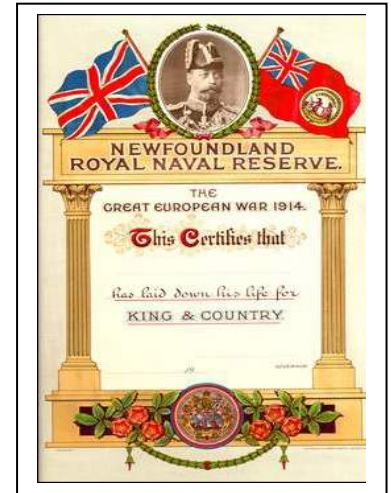
Seaman Baggs was to experience only some of the aftermath of the event as he had arrived in Halifax officially only on June 1 – having crossed the Cabot Strait on the SS Kyle on the night of May 31-June 1 - of that year of 1918. And once again there appear to be no records among his papers of what were to be his duties once having reported there. All that his documents show is that he was to serve there for a period of seventy-four days before returning to Newfoundland.

Whether he was ordered back to Newfoundland and HMS *Briton* on August 14 because he was beginning to exhibit the first symptoms of the malady to which he was eventually to succumb is not documented. However, it was to be only three days after having been re-attached to the Newfoundland Naval Reserve Drill Ship that on August 17 he was discharged and invalided to his home in the District of Twillingate. Whether he had been obliged to spend those three days on *Briton* is not specified.

The son of Richard Baggs, fisherman, and of Martha Baggs (née *Elliott**), of Bluff Head Cove, District of Twillingate, Newfoundland, he was youngest brother to Agnes-Mary, George, John-Henry, Phoebe-Jane, Richard-George, Dora-Elizabeth, Olivia, Frank and Mark.

**The couple was married in the Parish of Twillingate on January 11, 1882.*

Seaman Arthur William Baggs was reported as having died of illness - *pulmonary tuberculosis* - in Twillingate on October 26, 1919 (from the Newfoundland Death Register), but seen as October 22 of the same year on his gravestone: date of birth in Bluff Head Cove, Twillingate, February 6, 1898 (from his enlistment papers only).



(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: On December 14 of 1918, Seaman Arthur William Baggs received the Silver War Badge which was awarded... 'To service personnel honourably discharged due to wounds of sickness'. It was to be worn on civilian clothes only. – The image is from the *empiremedals.com* web-site.)



Seaman Baggs served in the Royal Navy – the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) was not a Canadian Force - and was seconded to the Royal Canadian Navy. He was not a Canadian as is cited in some sources, notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Arthur William Baggs 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 22, 2023.