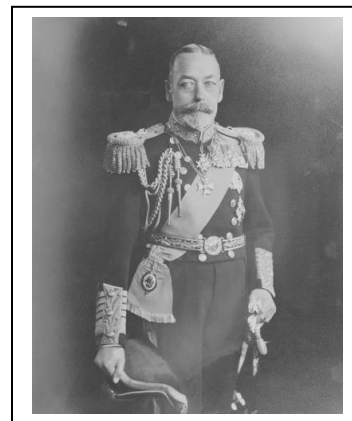


**Seaman Joseph Benoit, Number 2188x, is interred in the Ramsgate and St. Lawrence Cemetery in the English county of Kent: Grave reference, EA. (R.C.) 150.**

**(continued)**

Having decided to *answer the call*, Joseph Benoit relinquished his work as a fisherman(?) working out of the Cape St. George area of western Newfoundland and travelled to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on January 28 of 1915, he reported...*to duty*\*...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below) and was...*taken on strength*.

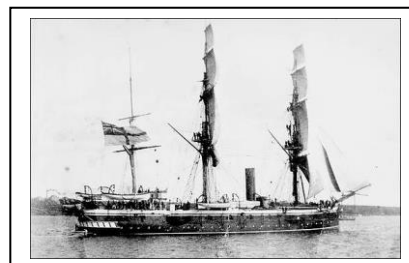


On that January 28 he enlisted\* for the first time into the Reserve (see further below) and was signed on to serve for a single year's war-time service\*\* before undergoing a satisfactory medical appraisal on the morrow. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

*\*The medical officer remarked that Joseph Benoit spoke only French.*

(Right above: *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.**

**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.**

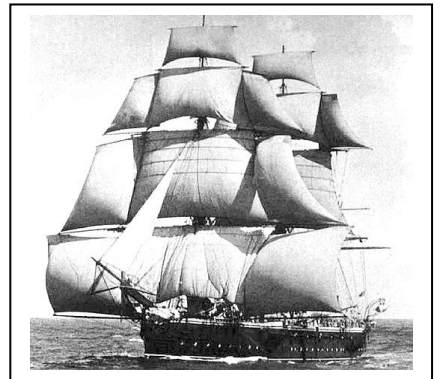


**(Right above: Recruits of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) seen here in front of HMS 'Calypso'. The shed-like superstructure seen behind them had been built onto the ship in 1902 to serve as a drill-hall. Whether the vessel was still 'Calypso', or had become 'Briton' by this time (see further below) is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial Archives via Wikipedia)**

**(Right below: H.M.S. '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, taken in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)**

**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.**

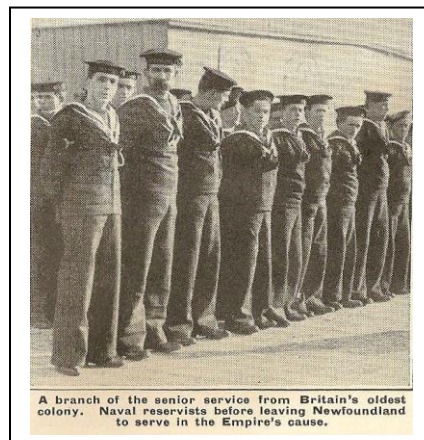
**Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to 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.**

Following a mere two weeks and two days of training in St. John's, Seaman Benoit, one of a draft of two-hundred naval reservists, is recorded as having embarked on February 13 onto the former *Allan Line* ocean-liner *Mongolian* which had apparently been despatched to Newfoundland for that purpose and was to continue on to Halifax before returning to the United Kingdom\*.

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



Some days before, on February 4 the detachment of volunteers for the Army that upon its arrival at Edinburgh Castle was to become 'C' Company of the Newfoundland contingent in the United Kingdom, had boarded the tender *Neptune* in St. John's Harbour for the short journey down the coast to Bay Bulls. There the ocean-going vessel *Dominion* had been awaiting to carry it across the Atlantic and other service records of Reservists suggest that the draft of that time was to be a part of that contingent.

(Right above: *The photograph of personnel of 'C' Company on board the 'Neptune' on the way to the harbour at Bay Bulls is from the Provincial Archives.*)



The available sources do not, however, record any Newfoundland naval reservists taking passage on *Dominion*. In fact, *Calypso's* drill register of the time records that the personnel were to leave St. John's on board the *Allan Line* vessel, the *SS Mongolian*, on February 17 – although the ship's captain records (see below) that it was the 18<sup>th</sup>.

How it was that February 13-14 came to be recorded as Seaman Benoit's date of departure for overseas service is not clear. To be exact, these dates found in his service file were those on which he was...*struck off strength*...from HMS *Calypso* in St. John's, Newfoundland, and then...*taken on strength*...at – or at least on the books of - HMS *Excellent*, the Naval gunnery school, on the south coast of England.

At the same time HMS *Calypso's* Drill Register documents that Seaman Benoit was still serving on that vessel on those dates and was to be so until February 17 when he was recorded as discharged from there to take trans-Atlantic passage on *Mongolian*. What is more, the captain of that vessel appears to have had the impression that his ship was not to (finally – see below) sail from Newfoundland until February 18.

The situation seems to have been even a bit more complicated than that: Days before, according to the local newspapers, on that February 4-5, *Mongolian* had left St. John's to attempt to force a passage through the heavy ice surrounding the entrance to St. John's and extending well offshore. It was to no avail and after three days of futile effort the ship returned to port.

In re-entering St. John's Harbour, however, the vessel struck a rock and, after inspection, it was decided necessary to do emergency repairs in the local dock. In the meantime some of the vessel's passengers were to take the train across the island so as to catch another ship in Halifax.

On or about February 23, the repairs having been completed, *Mongolian* departed Newfoundland once again, only to be immediately met with heavy seas which eventually were to at least partially undo much of the temporary work which had been completed to the ship only days before.

The following is an adaption of a letter written by *Mongolian's* captain after his ship had reached the safety of the harbour of Halifax on February 25. It was addressed to Lieutenant-Commander McDermott of HMS *Calypso* who saw fit to forward it to the Office of the Colonial Secretary – whence it made its way to the local press:

Dear Sir:-

It is but just that I submit the following to your notice.

As you are aware, the ship under my command left St. John's 18<sup>th</sup> February with 200 R.N.R. ratings from your ship under the command of Captain Alan Goodridge. On their arrival on board '*Mongolian*' Captain Goodridge at once established regular discipline and routine.

Shortly after leaving port rough and foggy weather was encountered and as ship proceeded East this weather became worse each day. On 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> a heavy gale raged from North-East with very high seas, causing the ship to labour considerably. On the latter date trouble arose through the giving-out of temporary repairs done in St. John's. Considerable water was found making its way into the fore end of the ship. After consultation I decided to return here to Halifax.

I requested Captain Goodridge with ratings under his command to assist me in every way consistent with requirements. It is needless to say such help was given in the most energetic and cheerful manner by way of preparing for any emergency. Manning deck pumps (which were kept going day and night until arrival into port). Also a number of men were detailed to assist in the engine room and stokehold. (Chief Engineer Brown of this ship desires me to specially mention the valuable assistance of these men.

For my part I cannot speak too highly of Captain Goodridge. His cheerful and composed manner throughout went far to inspire confidence not only in the men under his command but also the passengers entrusted to my care.

I would request, Sir, that you would be good enough to forward to His Excellency the Governor my appreciation for the assistance so ably rendered by him. I would also ask

you to place on record my high opinion of Petty Officer George Gill and Armourer Luxon.

The entire staff of my ship join with me in thanking the men of the Newfoundland Reserve whose conduct throughout was most exemplary and helpful in every way.

I may say that almost immediately upon arrival here the men were transferred to the SS 'Scandinavian' and sailed about 9 p.m..

J.W. Hatherly  
Master S.S. Mongolian

**(Right: The SS 'Mongolian' was an elderly vessel constructed in 1891. Built for the Allan Line Company she was to have served as a troopship during the Boer War before being bought by the British Admiralty, again for war service, in 1914 or 1915. She was not to survive the conflict: on July 21 of 1918 she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – The photograph of Mongolian is from the British Home Child Group International web-site.)**



SS Mongolian

Once having disembarked from *Scandinavian* - on which they had journeyed from Halifax (see in the letter further above) - in the United Kingdom in early March, any Naval personnel would have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part in England.

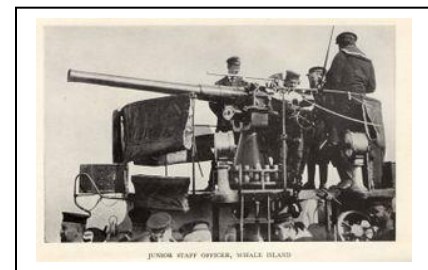
In the case of Seaman Benoit, the destination was to be southern England where he was to be...*taken on strength*...at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy gunnery school located on *Whale Island* at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth.

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



**(Right: Trainee-gunners undertaking drill on a naval gun on 'Whale Island' – from Wikipedia)**

He was to train there until April 17 when ordered to join another unit, HMS *Ceto*, a name shared by a once-luxury yacht, built in 1838 but not scrapped until 1932, and the Royal Navy Shore Base in and about the coastal town of Ramsgate where the afore-mentioned vessel was to act as a Depot Ship (see \* immediately below).



(continued)

*\*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, 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 which were organized around the coast of the United Kingdom during the Great War.*

*Thus HMS 'Excellent', the Navy Gunnery School on 'Whale Island' where Seaman Benoit had trained after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on the Island, but also a small, elderly, nondescript depot ship, to which all the gunnery personnel was attached and was the name to be emblazoned on the bands of their caps.*

*Now Seaman-Gunner Benoit was to change his HMS 'Excellent' cap-band for that of 'HMS Ceto', the shore base at Ramsgate in which harbour the Navy had a number of small vessels for work in the estuary of the River Thames and the Dover Straits, both adjacent to the town and to its harbour.*

Prior to the War, Ramsgate had been a popular seaside destination and it had also been a thriving fishing centre, both of which had suffered hugely because of German U-boat activity, mine-laying and, later, bombing raids. It was in order to counter the submarines and mines that that Admiralty created the *Dover Patrol* for which it requisitioned a number of fishing-boats, drifters and tugs, armed them, and placed Navy personnel on board.



*(Right above: Drifters and other small vessels lined up at the quay-side of Ramsgate Harbour during the early days of the Great War – from the Imperial War Museum web-site...[livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk](http://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk))*

Thus HMS *Ceto* came into being at Ramsgate, a base where Seaman-Gunner Benoit was...*taken on strength*...on April 18 of 1915.

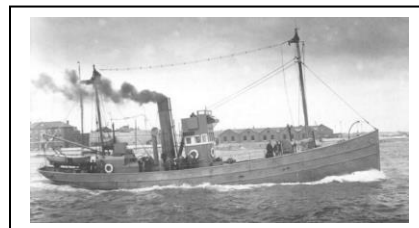
Shortly after having reported to HMS *Ceto*, Seaman-Gunner Benoit was to change cap-bands once more when he became a crew-member of a drifter, HMS *Loyal Star*, a vessel engaged in the destruction of enemy mines.

There was nothing particularly conspicuous about *Loyal Star*. Perhaps constructed mainly of wood, she was just another hired drifter, Admiralty Number A, 1289. She had been built in 1913, weighed ninety-five tons and had been registered as LT. 111. in the fishing town of Lowestoft

further up the coast. No longer simply a fishing-boat, she was - likely later in life - to carry armament comprising a single six-pounder gun.

She had come into war-time service in December of 1914 and was to remain until 1919 performing duties as a patrol boat and minesweeper.

(Right: *The Royal Navy Drifter 'City of Liverpool', later to be sunk by a mine on July 31, 1918 – photograph from Wikipedia)*

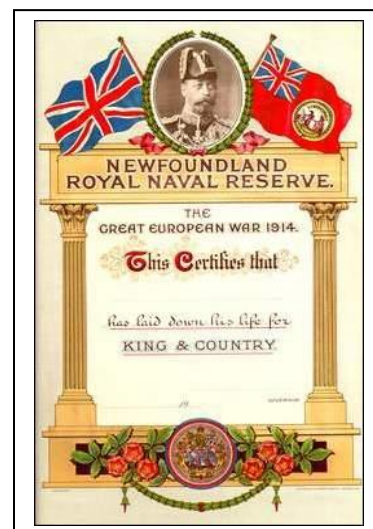


One of the most rudimentary methods of disposing with mines was to explode it by rifle-fire, at times a dangerous practice. Seaman-Gunner Benoit was at sea on *Loyal Star* and engaged in this activity on May 4 when the accident occurred.

Seaman John Benoit, perhaps of the same family according to some sources, perhaps not according to others, but certainly having been a good friend for years of Seaman-Gunner Joseph Benoit, was cleaning his rifle when it accidentally discharged. The shot hit Seaman-Gunner Benoit...*under jaw and passed through the back of neck*; he died minutes later.

An enquiry decided that the death had been completely accidental and a verdict of...*Death by misadventure...*was thereupon recorded.

(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)*



*The following few details of his family have been difficult to ascertain and may not be totally correct. They are surely incomplete and different sources appear to be contradictory.*

The son of John Benoit, fisherman, and of Annie Benoit (née Jesso(?)\*), recorded as being, at the time of Joseph Benoit's enlistment, residents of Cape St. George, Newfoundland, he may have been brother to Marie-Josphine, born March 24, 1896, also recorded at Cape St. George – but the family appears not to be found in the 1911 Census.

*\*This couple was married in Stephenville on September 2, 1894, by a Reverend O'Rourke, Roman Catholic priest for Stephenville although the wedding is cited as having been a Church of England ceremony.*



Seaman-Gunner Benoit died on May 4, 1915, at the *reported* age of nineteen years: date of birth at Cape St. George, Newfoundland, March 15, 1896 (from British Army and Navy Records for Birth, Marriage and Death) – which suggests that perhaps either *his* birth-date or that of his aforesaid sister, Marie-Josphine, is suspect.



*The funeral of the deceased took place on Wednesday, the body being interred in the Roman Catholic portion of the Ramsgate Cemetery. The officiating clergy at the graveside were the Rev. J. A. Fox and the Rev. J. O. Spencer. The corpse was followed to its last resting-place by about sixty of deceased's late comrades, the officers present including Capt. H. E. Grace and Sub-Lieut. Lewin. The coffin was covered with the Union Jack, and the floral tributes included a beautiful wreath from the officers and men of the Loyal Star, a cross from Capt. Grace, and an anchor from the Commanding Officers of the 1st Division. The coffin was of polished pitch pine with brass furniture, and the arrangements were carried out by Messrs. W. P. Blackburn and Son. – from the [sussexhistoryforum.co.uk](http://sussexhistoryforum.co.uk) web-site)*

*(Preceding page: The main gateway and entrance to the Ramsgate and St. Lawrence Cemetery – photograph from 2011(?))*

*Seaman Benoit 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 Joseph Benoit\* was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).*



*\*His tombstone reads 'Joseph H. Benoit' but the 'H.' seems not to appear in any other sources and may, in fact, have been an initial of his father.*

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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 22, 2023.