



Seaman Victor Joseph Benoit (also found as *Bennoit*), Service Number 1556x, the sole Newfoundlander among the five lost on the *Frans Olivae* for whom there is a last resting-place, lies in Deal Cemetery on the Kentish coast and only kilometres removed from the grave of his cousin James, he also of the Newfoundland Naval Reserve and having died just months before.

(continued)

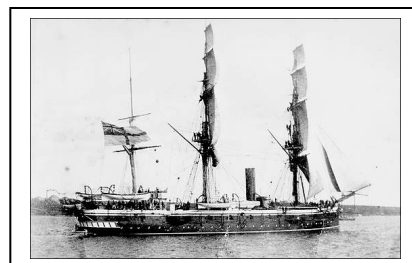
Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Victor Joseph Benoit relinquished his occupation as a fisherman in the Newfoundland west-coast community of Cap St-George/ Cape St. George to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on January 16 of 1915, he reported...*to duty**...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below) and was...*taken on strength*.



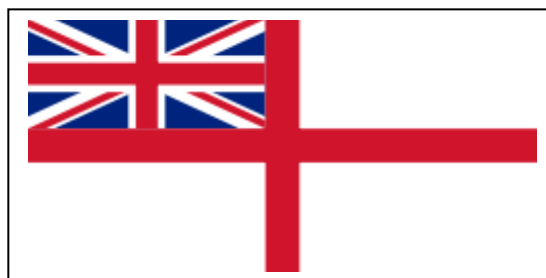
On that mid-January day he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below) and was signed on to a single year's* war-time service before undergoing a satisfactory medical appraisal two days later. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George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

(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)

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.

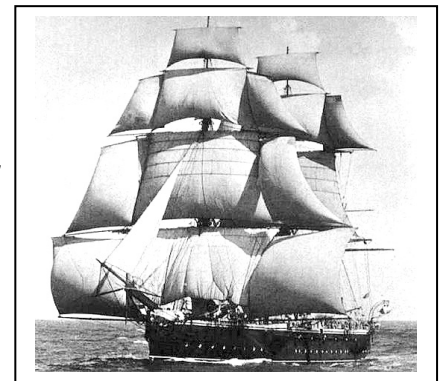


A branch of the senior service from Britain's oldest colony. Naval reservists before leaving Newfoundland to serve in the Empire's cause.

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, 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.



(Preceding page: *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)*

Nineteen days after having first reported to *Calypso* in St. John's, on February 4 Seaman Benoit was apparently promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit to that of Seaman; it would then appear that on the same February 4-5 of that 1915, he was to depart from St. John's to cross the Atlantic – this suggested by the dates documented in his sparse service file.

On that date, 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, 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* awaited to carry it across the Atlantic and it might be assumed that the Naval Reservists were 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 *this* personnel was 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 18th.

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:

(continued)

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 18th 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 22nd and 23rd 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.

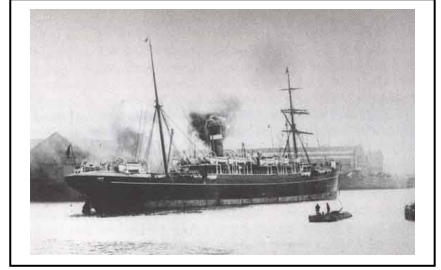
The entire staff of my ship join with me in thanking the men of the Newfoundland Reserve whose conduct throughout was most exemplary and helpful in every way.

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

(continued)

(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 the spring of 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.)



Once having disembarked from *Scandinavian* - on which they had journeyed from Halifax (see in letter on previous page) - 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 *Pembroke I* at Chatham in the English county of Kent.

Pembroke I was the base for regular seamen and it was therefore *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Benoit was to be attached.

**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 elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments – and known as stone frigates – were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, thousands of men who laboured ashore.



Which is why Seaman Benoit would have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' cap-band.

(Right above: Some buildings 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)

Seaman Benoit was to serve ten weeks less two days on the nominal roll of *Pembroke I** – this included the time spent crossing the Atlantic. On April 14 he was taken off *Pembroke's* strength and four days afterwards – did he enjoy a few days of furlough, perhaps in nearby London? – reported to HMS *Ceto*, the base in the not-distant coastal

town of Ramsgate on the estuary of the River Thames from which operated some of the ships of the *Dover Patrol*.

**His service record shows that he was struck off strength of HMS Calypso and became a sailor of Pembroke I on February 4-5, 1915, even though he was likely still in St. John's. To complicate matters, Calypso's Drill Register document him as serving in the Reserve in St. John's up until the above-mentioned February 17.*

Prior to the *Great 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 the 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)

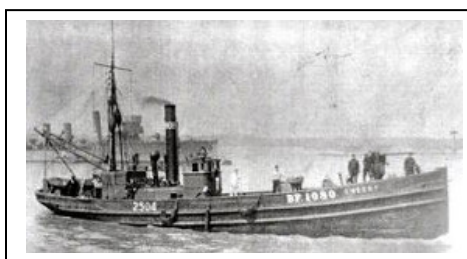
Thus HMS *Ceto* came into being at Ramsgate, a base where Seaman Benoit was to be...*taken on strength*...on April 18 of 1915.

At some point after having reported to HMS *Ceto*, Seaman Benoit was to change cap-bands once more when he became a crew-member of a drifter, HMS *Frons Olivae*, a vessel at times engaged in the search for and the destruction of enemy mines.



(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)

There was nothing particularly conspicuous about *Frons Olivae*. Perhaps constructed mainly of wood, she was just another hired drifter, Admiralty Number A, 1289. She had been built in 1912, weighed some ninety-five tons and had been registered as YH.217. in the fishing town of Yarmouth further up the coast. No longer simply a fishing-boat, she was to carry armament comprising a single three-pounder gun.



(Right above: The Royal Navy Drifter 'Cheery' - which was to survive the conflict - of the same class as 'Frons Olivae', the photograph showing a small gun mounted on her fore-deck – photograph from Wikipedia)



(Right: A photographic example of the type of afore-mentioned 3 pounder gun as possibly mounted on *Frons Olivae* – from Wikipedia)

There appears to be no account of Seaman Benoit and his ship on their last mission off Ramsgate together – it may be no surprise than no log-book is available as it likely went down with the ship. We do not know even if she was merely on patrol or mine-clearing – or both – on that December 12 of 1915. It is recorded, however, that she was the victim of a mine set by U-5 (*U-boat-5*) near to what was known as the *Elbow Buoy*.

One of the most rudimentary methods of disposing with a mine in the early days of the *Great War* was to explode it by rifle-fire, at times a dangerous practice. Whether the concussion of an exploding mine detonated another one which was closer to the vessel or whether *Frons Olivae* came into physical contact with one of them appears not to be known – nor of course was there any survivor to tell the tale.



The son of Joseph Benoit, fisherman, and of Ellen Benoit (née *Damort* or *Damois**, deceased on November 21 of 1913) of Cap St-George/ Cape St. George, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Mary-Leona, Joseph, John-Edward, Darius, Isaac, William-Joseph and perhaps Mary, and step-brother to Adolph, Isabel, Victoria, Caliste and to Margaret.

(Right above: A *Memorial Scroll*, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life while in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve)

*The couple had married on June 26 of 1895. Ellen was to die as seen above, on November 21 of 1913 in the aftermath of childbirth, the child possibly Mary who was to die only days later on November 30. Joseph later married widow Allie White, in Cape St- George on May 10 of 1916.



(Right above: Both of the above photographs are claimed in different sources to be that of Victor Joseph Benoit while the one on the right in another source is also said to be that of Joseph Benoit who accidentally died while serving on His Majesty's Drifter 'Loyal Star' – see elsewhere among these files. They not only appear to be of perhaps different persons but both are wearing cap-bands which show them to be crew-members of the 'Frons Olivae'.)

Seaman* Victor Joseph Benoit was to die on October 12 of 1915 in the sinking of the *Frons Olivae* at the reported age of nineteen years: date of birth in Cape St. George, Newfoundland, March 31, 1896 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register and also Royal Navy Death Records).

(continued)

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 Vincent 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).



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.