

BRENTON, G.



Seaman George Ambrose Brenton (found also as *Brinton*), Number 1502x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having relinquished his occupation as a fisherman and having travelled from the Burin Peninsula to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on December 21 of 1914 George Ambrose Brenton reported...*to duty*...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).



On that same December 21 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 at the same moment. 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.***

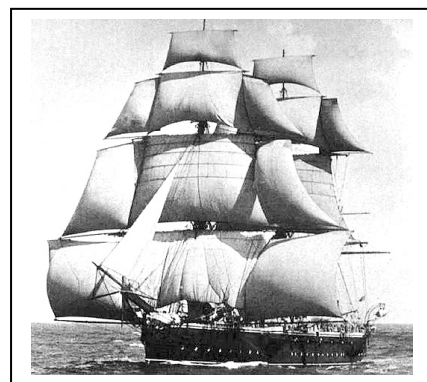
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion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



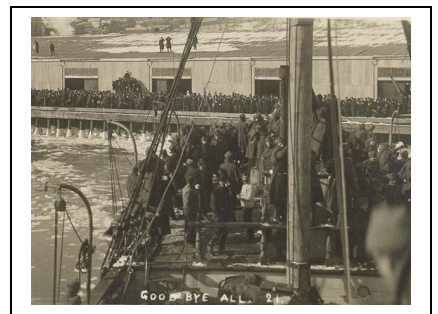
(Preceding page: *H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named Briton in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – photograph by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum*)

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



Four weeks less a day, on January 17-18 of the New Year, 1915, after having first reported to *Calypso* in St. John's, on January 7 Seaman Brenton was promoted from his status of Seaman Recruit to that of Seaman; twenty-eight days later again, on February 4 of that 1915 he was to depart from St. John's to cross the Atlantic – at least, that is what his sparse service record appears to suggest.

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 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 18th.

The situation seems to have been 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.

(continued)

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:-

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.

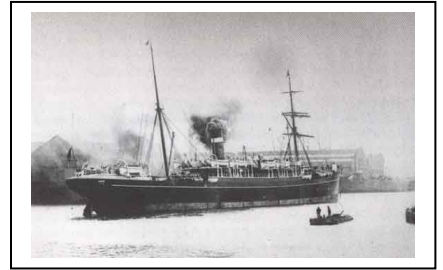
The entire staff of my ship join with me in thanking the men of the Newfoundland Reserve whose conduct throughout was most exemplary and helpful in every way.

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

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(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.)



Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom, any Naval personnel would have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training – or to await a posting - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part in England. In the case of Seaman Brenton, the destination was to be HMS Vivid I at Plymouth-Devonport in the English county of Devon.

**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 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.

HMS Vivid, the base to which Seaman Brenton 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 caps.

These establishments were at times divided into sections: 'Vivid I' was where the seamen (as opposed to the engine-room personnel, for example, in 'Vivid II') such as Seaman Brenton were to be stationed often in 'holding-barracks' before being dispatched to serve on one of His Majesty's ships.

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



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Seaman Brenton was to be stationed at *Vivid I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until mid-April of that 1915. The records then show that he was attached to HMS *Ceto* on the eastern side of the country where he reported on the eighteenth day of that month. He was to serve there for one-hundred sixty-three days.

During the period comprising the *Great War*, HMS *Ceto* was the name assigned to the small Royal Navy base in the coastal town of Ramsgate from which harbour operated some of the ships of the *Dover Patrol*.

Prior to the *Great War*, Ramsgate, on the southern side of the Thames estuary, 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 line 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, as seen above, Seaman Brenton was to be...*taken on strength*...on that April 18 of 1915. And, as Seaman Brenton would have noticed while serving at *Vivid I*, at Ramsgate there was another elderly vessel which was the parent ship of the establishment whose name, HMS *Ceto*, was found of the cap-band of many of the personnel working there – even if they were never to set foot on her deck.

However, it appears not to be recorded whether Seaman Brenton was one of those who served on the aforesaid ship or on land-based facilities in the area of the harbour. But nor does his file record him having been attached to any of the number of smaller vessels which operated out of the place, so *that* possibility appears to be unlikely.



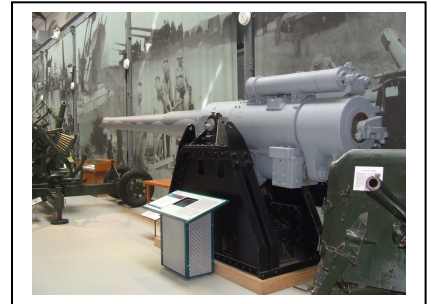
At some point towards the end of this posting, Seaman Brenton was on the move across the water to Ireland*, to the city of Belfast where he had been ordered dispatched to be a crew-member of the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Almanzora*.

**It should be remembered that all of Ireland was under British rule at this time and was an important part of the Royal Navy's operations, particularly perhaps in the struggle against the U-boats for control of the North Atlantic.*

(Right above: *Built for the Royal Mail Line's South American service, the sixteen-thousand ton Almanzora had been completed in 1914 and was requisitioned immediately*

for war-time duties by the Admiralty – her maiden commercial voyage was not to come about until 1920. Refitted and armed with six six-inch naval guns, she was to become a part of naval operations on August 23 – her log book cites September 29 - of 1915 as a ship of the 10th Cruiser Squadron patrolling the northern approaches to the British Isles. The vessel survived the War and was to work for the Navy throughout in Second World War as well. – photograph from the *Naval-History.net* website)

Seaman Brenton joined his ship already in Belfast on September 29, there to spend the following eight days in port in preparation for the vessel's final sea-trial's and gunnery exercises before her first patrol. Thus her first voyage was of short duration, a few hours to cross the Irish Sea to the Welsh port of Bangor on October 7.



(Right: A six-inch gun such as those mounted on 'Almanzora', although the one seen here has been fitted for coastal defence – photograph from 2010(?) and taken at the Royal Artillery Museum at Woolwich)

After a further ten days delay her single anchor was weighed and 'Almanzora' departed northwards to join the other requisitioned armed merchant cruisers of the *Northern Patrol*, during much of the time the crew familiarizing itself with the new ship and her new equipment.

Seaman Brenton's first and only patrol on *Almanzora* was to be of thirty-one days' duration. During that time the vessel had sailed mainly in waters around Iceland and in the area surrounded by Iceland, the Shetlands, Scotland and Ireland. In that four-week period she was to have contact with Royal Navy ships on at least thirteen occasions, had intercepted, questioned and at times boarded thirteen British and foreign commercial vessels, and had communicated with other armed merchant cruisers of the 10th Cruiser Squadron also on patrol, eleven times.

On November 18, Seaman Brenton and his vessel entered the Mersey River to pass before the port-city of Liverpool; his ship was to be towed on the morrow into dock in the neighbouring port of Birkenhead. Seaman Brenton was now back on land.

While his service file shows that on December 3 he was...*struck off strength*...from HMS *Almanzora*, there is then a void of eight days in the records of his whereabouts until December 11 when he joined HMS *Pembroke*. This is an unusual situation to which there appears to be no explanation in his dossier.

From Liverpool in the north-west of England he now travelled south-eastward to the county of Kent and to HMS *Pembroke*, not far distant from Ramsgate where he had been posted to HMS *Ceto* only months before.

The land-based naval establishment of HMS *Pembroke lies on the River Medway, itself a tributary of the larger and better-known River Thames, in the county of Kent. During the Great War it expanded greatly and some of its several Divisions were out of necessity moved to other locations. It would appear, however, that Seaman Brenton was to be**

stationed at Pembroke, Chatham, from that December 11 until May 28 of the following year during which time, on January 27, he had been promoted to the rank of Leading Seaman.

**As had been the case at 'Vivid I', there was also a series of venerable ships all 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. Leading Seaman Brenton was likely one of that number.*



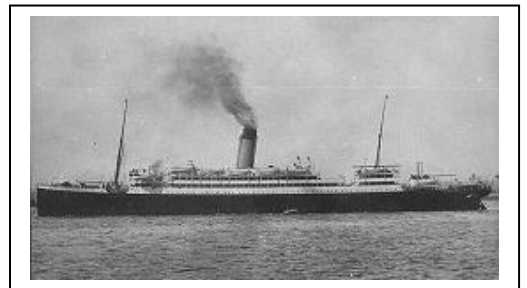
(Right above: Some buildings of the large Royal Navy complex which was the HMS 'Pembroke' naval establishment at Chatham for just some eighty years. Today it has been transformed into a university campus. – photograph from 2010)

On May 29 he was transferred to *Pembroke III*, the whereabouts of which are unclear. However, it appears to have provided facilities for those training to be a mechanic and apparently not necessarily just a 'naval' mechanic. Whatever the case, Leading Seaman Brenton* was to remain at *Pembroke III* until January 13 of the following year, 1917, after which it appears that he was granted leave to home, his passage having been arranged on another armed merchant cruiser: *HMS Laurentic*.

**Apart from the single entry in his personal Service Record, there appears nowhere else in the records any mention of his having attained the rank of Leading Seaman. Nor does there seem to be any record of his having been demoted. If there is evidence which supports this rank, the author would be pleased to amend the dossier.*

Thus by January 23 he had left *Pembroke III* and had travelled to the place at which he was to board the afore-mentioned vessel.

The ship was to sail from Birkenhead - the port adjacent to Liverpool into which he, as Seaman Brenton, had sailed thirteen months previously - on that January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which 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 for leave or for repatriation.*

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in Lough (*Lough* pronounced as in

Loch Ness) Swilly 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; nor after the second explosion was there any power and thus no distress signal could be sent.

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 isolated on the rocky, barren, uninhabited coast of Donegal.

(Right top and right: *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 George Brenton (found mostly as *Brinton* and on occasion, *Brinston*), fisherman, and of Ellen Brenton (née *Bennett**) of nearby Salmonier before Port au Bras, both in the District of Burin, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Gertrude-Maud (born 1894) and to Gertrude (born 1903).

**The couple was married in Burin on November 8, 1892.*

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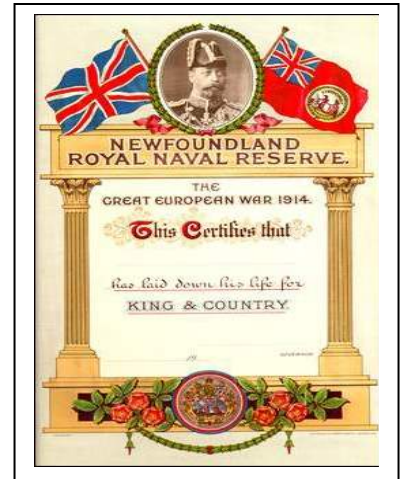


(Preceding page: *The War Memorial in the community of Ship Cove, Burin, honours the sacrifice of Seaman George A. Brinton, although he was not... 'drowned in the North Sea'... as stated on the plinth but off the west coast of Ireland. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

Seaman George Ambrose Brenton was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic...* on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty-three years: date of birth of George Ambrose *Brinton* in Salmonier, Burin, Newfoundland, January 26, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) – although his enlistment papers cite 1894 as having been the year.

(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*)

Seaman Brenton 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 George Ambrose Brenton was entitled to the 1914-15 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) 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.