



Seaman Leslie Atheling Brinston (found also as *Brinton*), Number 305x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having been summoned to his contracted service by the naval authorities, Leslie Atheling Brinston was to relinquish his occupation as a fisherman and to travel from North Harbour, Placentia Bay, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. On November 5 of 1914 Leslie Atheling Brinston reported...*to duty*...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).



Leslie Atheling Brinston had already enlisted in the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) ten years prior to this time, in 1904. Early records show him as having undertaken training periods of twenty-eight days from then until the year 1908. He had committed himself to a five-year service period which was to comprise in all a total of five of those training sessions of which the last recorded was in November and December of 1910 – during which period he was to serve as Seaman Brinston, Service Number 13463.

*\*It appears that Leslie Atheling Brinston was the four-hundred tenth volunteer to register into the Naval Reserve.*

The same early records then show that in November of 1909 he was to re-enroll into the Reserve, on this occasion to be assigned the service number 305x which he was to carry into the War and by which he would be thereupon identified on all his war-time records.

However, it would appear that on this second occasion he was to undergo only two of the five afore-mentioned training periods, in 1909 and 1910. There the records end...temporarily.

Some four years afterwards, the events of the summer of 1914 were to dictate that Seaman Brinston, Number 305x, be summoned to honour his commitment to the Crown and report...to *duty*.

Therefore on that November 5 of 1914, Leslie Atheling Brinston reported, ordered by *Royal Proclamation*, for war-time service\*, likely underwent a further medical assessment and, if he had not previously done so, was to pledge his allegiance\*\* to the King-Emperor, George V.

*\*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.*

*\*\*\*Had he done so in 1904 or 1909, it would have been to the preceding monarch, King Edward VII.*

(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 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.*

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***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.***



***(Right: 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 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)***

***Following those afore-mentioned two weeks less a day of service\* in St. John's, and having been retro-actively promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit, the then-Seaman Brinston, one of a draft of one-hundred forty-nine naval reservists, embarked on November 18-19 onto the Allan Line ocean-liner Carthaginian which was apparently returning on its commercial route from Philadelphia(?) to Glasgow and thereupon took the draft on board. She sailed at nine o'clock in the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup>, its reservist passengers un-mentioned in the local newspapers.***





*\*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 oft-times waived.*

**(Right: A relatively elderly vessel, 'Carthaginian' had been launched in October of 1884. She apparently remained un-requisitioned as a troop transport during the conflict although this did not prevent her from being sunk by a mine laid by a U-boat off the Irish coast on June 14 of 1917 – happily without any loss of life it may be added. – the undated photograph of Carthaginian entering St. John's harbour has been donated to the Maritime History Archive web-site by Captain Harry Stone. )**



Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom, while others of his draft were ordered to various Royal Naval establishments around the English coast either for further training or to await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships, Seaman Brinston was one of those to be dispatched directly to a vessel. His was to be an *Allan Line* trans-Atlantic passenger-liner and mail ship, by that time transformed into the armed merchant cruiser *HMS Virginian*.



**(Right above: An eleven-thousand ton ocean-going passenger and cargo-carrying ship built in 1905, 'Virginian' was requisitioned by the Admiralty soon after the onset of hostilities. Re-fitted and initially armed with eight 4.7-inch naval guns and two quick-firing six-pounders for her war-time work, she officially came into service on November 13 of 1914 and thus remained, having survived the conflict, until January 31, 1920. – the image of a peace-time Virginian is from the Naval-History.net web-site.)**

**(Right below: An example of the above-mentioned 4.7-inch naval gun with which HMS 'Virginian' had been equipped prior to sailing on her war-time duties. – from Wikipedia)**

**HMS Virginian was to be attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, also known as the Northern Patrol, a force originally having comprised out-of-date warships which, unable to deal with the harsh elements, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-cargo ships carrying guns often as old as the sometimes-elderly ships on which they were mounted.**



The ships of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling – and certainly not prepared - for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this, these vessels had to patrol the stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

According to his scant Service Record, Seaman Brinston was now to remain attached to *Virginian* for almost two years, *officially* from November 19 of 1914 until October 10 of 1916, twenty-three months hence, although it appears that the ship itself was not commissioned for service until December 10, 1914.

Exactly where – but likely Liverpool as suggested below - and on what date it was that Seaman Brinston at first set foot on her deck and reported for duty is not clear as *Virginian's* records – her log-books – do not commence until the aforesaid December 10 at which time the vessel, in Liverpool, *Canada Dock*, was completing loading her final stores and ammunition, and other crew-members were engaged in cleaning the ship.

But three days later, at twenty-five minutes past six in the darkness of the evening of December 13, 1914, Seaman Brinston's ship...*left the dock and backed into the river* – the River Mersey – to venture forth on her first patrol.

Judging from her aforementioned log-book entries, *Virginian's* maiden patrol had been a very quiet affair. She had returned to Liverpool on January 6 having sailed some five-thousand miles (eight-thousand kilometres) and burned some two-thousand tons of coal in doing so. She had stopped, questioned and on occasion boarded only six British and/or foreign commercial vessels and had had contact perhaps only twice with a sister-ship of the Northern Patrol, HMS *Teutonic*.

After that first venture, Seaman Brinston and *Virginian* were to spend but five days in Liverpool. It appears that '*liberty*' was granted on at least one occasion but re-victualling and replenishing other stores along with the indispensable coal, perhaps not unreasonably, took priority.

Thus in like fashion the following twenty-two months were to pass with nineteen patrols being undertaken during that time. One-hundred seventy-two of these days would be spent in port, either Liverpool – including a major overhaul of sixty-four days, but with no details of Seaman Brinston during this period – Glasgow, Birkenhead, or the coaling stations of Busta Voe in the Shetlands and Loch Ewe in Northwest Scotland.

The other two-hundred seventy or so days had been spent at sea - usually a rough one.

On October 11, 1916, Seaman Brinston, having disembarked in Liverpool from HMS *Virginian* for the last time, was attached to HMS *Victory I*, a shore-based Royal Naval establishment to be primarily found in the English south-coast naval city of Portsmouth. Whether, in fact, he was to be a physical presence there in Portsmouth – personnel from HMS *Victory* were likely to be distributed to various posts around the United Kingdom and Ireland – is not clear, but it appears that he was not assigned to be a crew-member of another ship and thus remained on the nominal roll of HMS *Victory I* until the final day of that year of 1916.



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***\*HMS ‘Victory’, was primarily two entities: it had been a training establishment\* – during the Great War evolving into as many as nine Divisions - originally based in the Naval city and port of Portsmouth; and it was also the usually elderly and innocuous ship to which the majority of the land-based personnel would have been attached, at least officially and bureaucratically, so that even if working on land, they might legally fall under the jurisdiction of the Navy. At Portsmouth the ship was HMS ‘Victory’, elderly but hardly innocuous, the venerable warship from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although her illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.***

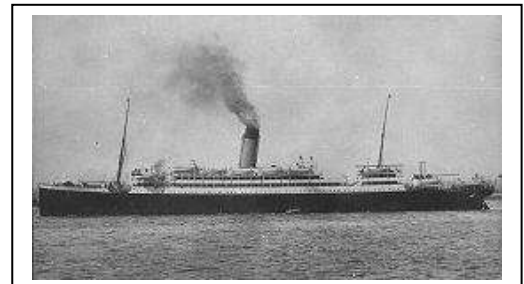
***(Preceding page: HMS ‘Victory’ in dry dock in the southern English port-city of Portsmouth where she has been for a century – photograph from Wikipedia)***

***\*During the Great War ‘Victory I’ was also to serve as a ‘holding barracks’ where seamen were to await a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships – or otherwise.***

There appears to be no record among Seaman Brinston’s papers of the happenings of, or his whereabouts during, the first three weeks of the New Year, 1917 – he must have officially been somewhere or else he would have been sought as a deserter. There is a suggestion that he may have become ill during this time and that it may have been decided to repatriate him for further medical attention – but this is not confirmed.

On the other hand, Seaman Brinston had by this time been serving His Majesty for some twenty-six months. As with other Navy men from Newfoundland in the same situation, it may well be that he had been granted leave back home and that by January 23 he – and those others – had found the way to Birkenhead, the port adjacent to Liverpool from where *Virginian* had sailed for her – and his – first patrol all those months previously. He – and they - had then embarked onto the armed merchant cruiser which was to carry them, or so it was intended, across the Atlantic to Halifax: **HMS *Laurentic***.

The ship was to sail from Birkenhead 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: 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 Bunrana, Lough (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) Swilly, to put ashore 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.

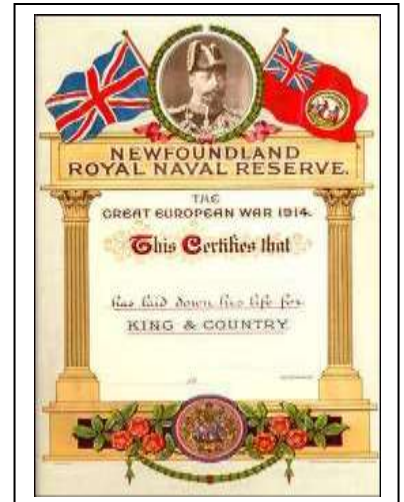
And those that eventually managed to land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, uninhabited coast of Donegal.



(Previous page 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 – both 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 Robert William Brinston, fisherman, and of Amelia Jane Brinston (née *Giles*\*, deceased March 3, 1921) of Sound Island, Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Reginald-Allison (died young), Cecilia-Blanche (died young), Allison-Allington\*\*, Reginald-Gordon, George-Clement\*\* and to Elizabeth – M..





Leslie Atheling Brinston had apparently also been married twice: in North Harbour on January 31 of 1908 to Amelia Murray with whom he had parented two children, Frederick-Cambridge and Emmile-Margaret (sic). Amelia was to pass away on June 26, 1912, and Leslie Brinston had subsequently wed Susie Reid on June 16, 1914, but the couple was to have no offspring.

(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*)

*\*Robert William Brinston and Amelia Jane Giles were married in the Parish of Sound Island, Placentia Bay, on December 10, 1885.*

(Right: *Seaman Leslie H.(?) Brinston shares this family memorial in the Bethel United Church Cemetery in North Harbour with his brother George, Private Number 1772 of the Newfoundland Regiment who fell on October 9, 1917, during Passchendaele. – photograph from 2022*)



*\*\*While his brother George was 'Killed in Action', his brother Allison also apparently would die as a consequence of his service to King and Country during the Great War, from tuberculosis. Both their stories are to be found elsewhere among these files.*

(Right: *The grave of Allison Allington Brinston in the Old United Church Cemetery in North Harbour is seen here in the foreground. – photograph from 2022*)



Seaman Leslie Atheling Brinston was recorded as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic...*on January 25 of 1917 at the *reported* age of thirty-two years: date of birth on Sound Island, Newfoundland, February 15, 1887 (this and other family information from the *Brinston Families Worldwide* web-site and from copies of Newfoundland Vital Statistics).

*Seaman Brinston 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 Leslie Atheling Brinston was entitled to the 1914-1915 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 20, 2023.**