



(Above: A photograph of Seaman Butler's grave not as yet being available, this image of the Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery comes from the web-site of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.)

Seaman William Butler, Number 1428x, is buried in the *Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery* at Ismailia on the Suez Canal, Egypt: grave reference, A. 13..

Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, William Butler thereupon travelled from the Conception Bay community of Cupids (originally *Cupper's Cove*) to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on November 30 of 1914, he reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

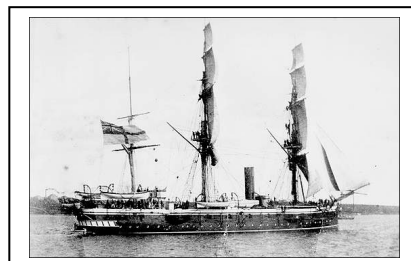
On that same November day he enlisted into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's war-time service* and underwent the required medical assessment on the morrow. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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.*

(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*)

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.

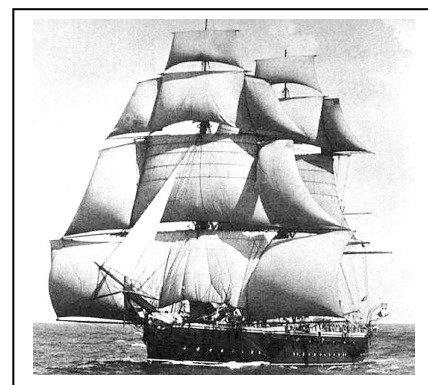
Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.



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

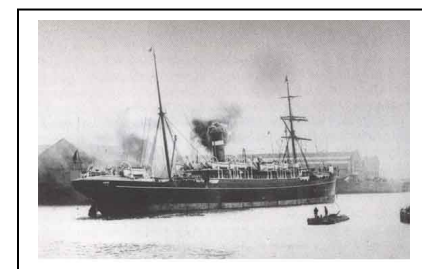
(Right above: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)

An elderly vessel, 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 above: HMS '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 in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

Seventeen days* after having first reported to Calypso in St. John's, on December 17, Seaman Recruit Butler was one of a draft of one-hundred fifty-three Naval volunteers to board the steamship Mongolian in St. John's Harbour for passage across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The ship sailed for the Scottish port-city of Glasgow at four o'clock on that same afternoon.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Built in 1891 for use by the Allan Line for the transport of emigrants from Europe to North America, 'Mongolian' was a slow vessel with a speed of just twelve knots and was, by 1914, becoming obsolescent. She was nevertheless to be bought in 1914 for use by the Admiralty and remained in service until July 21 of 1918 when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – photograph from the British Home Child Group International web-site)*

**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'.*

As seen above, Glasgow was to be Seaman Recruit Butler's draft's destination. Upon disembarkation the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship, ordered to undergo further training - or simply to await a posting - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part in southern England.

In the case of the now-Seaman Butler, the destination was to be HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy Gunnery School and its adjacent facilities just off-shore from the south-coast naval port-city of Portsmouth at almost the other end of the country.

**HMS 'Excellent' was the name – and also still is the name - of the Royal Navy's Gunnery School which had been established in a ship of the same name in 1829, the vessel being permanently moored just outside Portsmouth dockyard. As the years passed the ships were to be replaced, but each in turn was to be named HMS 'Excellent'.*



(Right above: *Drill on a naval gun on Whale Island during the period of the Great War – from Wikipedia)*

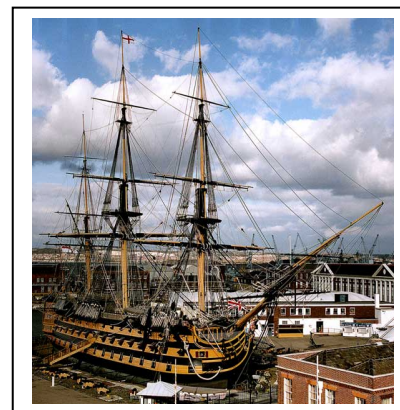
And as the years passed, the use evolved of the nearby 'Whale (originally 'Whaley') Island' as facilities were constructed on it. In 1885 the Gunnery School was moved from the ship of the time to be re-established on the island itself.



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

Which is why Seaman Butler would soon have been wearing an HMS *Excellent* cap-band.

After several weeks of digesting how the Royal Navy's armaments worked, Seaman Butler was then placed on the books of the nearby HMS *Victory I* on January 29 although for exactly how long - or even if he was to remain in Portsmouth – appears not to have been recorded – but likely some seventeen days.



(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*)

HMS 'Victory', like most of the so-called stone-frigates (naval establishments on shore), was three entities: it was a training establishment originally, and also a holding-barracks for seamen not only in training but awaiting a posting to one of His Majesty's ships, its facilities initially set in the naval city and port of Portsmouth; thirdly, it was also the ship to which the majority of the land-based personnel would have been, at least officially and bureaucratically – if not physically - attached**.*

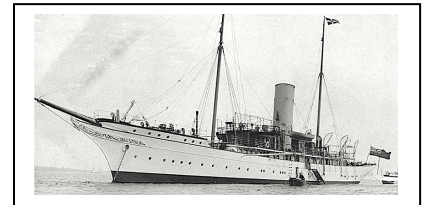
At Portsmouth this vessel was HMS 'Victory', the warship from which Admiral Nelson had directed the 'Battle of Trafalgar' – although her illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.

**The large influx of personnel due to the War necessitated further Divisions and functions being transferred to other areas of the United Kingdom.*

***Naval discipline differed in some ways from civil and even Army law, and those in naval uniform, even though based on land and perhaps never to go to sea, had to be on the books of a real ship for that discipline to be applied. Thus a normally small, obsolescent and obscure vessel – 'Victory' was the exception - was used for this purely bureaucratic purpose.*

As seen above, Seaman Butler had been posted to *Victory I*, one of the several Divisions of *HMS Victory*, each specializing in some way from the others – *Victory II*, for example, trained stokers and other engine-room personnel. *Victory I* was dedicated to the training of seamen or, if they were perhaps already of that rank as was the case of Seaman Butler, it was, as also seen above, a holding-barracks where he was now to stay for eighteen days until February 27.

On that date he was transferred – at least on paper – to the aforementioned *Victory II* but for only four days – so it may well have been a transfer made only on paper, although there is a ship mentioned, *Jeannette*, of which there were three: a requisitioned yacht; and two Q-ships (decoy ships for anti-U-boat work).



Whatever may have been the case, he was apparently to serve on *Jeannette* for only two days before being attached to another vessel, *HMS Valiant II*.

(Right above: *The photograph of the yacht 'Jeannette' at anchor – there is no date but it is likely peace-time as no guns are visible – is from the superyachtimes.com web-site.*

This second ship was another requisitioned yacht, initially named *Valiant*, built in 1893 before then being re-fitted and armed for war-time service which she began in mid-November of 1914. She likely carried wireless – not every ship did so in those days – and as such was employed as an Auxiliary Patrol Leader or for other work in a Special Yacht Squadron, based either in *home waters* or in the Mediterranean – or both. In February of 1915 she was re-named *Valiant II* and was re-armed to possess greater firing-power*.

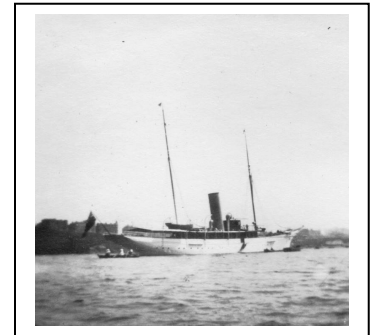
**Having survived the Great War, Valiant II was sold in 1919, to be requisitioned once again at the beginning of the Second World War. She, by then named 'Hellas', was sunk in Piraeus Harbour (Athens) in 1941 while evacuating wounded British soldiers during the German invasion of Greece.*

While there appears to be no documentation available *a propos* the detailed war-time career of *Valiant II*, some sources as well as circumstantial evidence suggest that she may have served in the English south-coast area of Southampton and Portsmouth. She appears not to have been involved in any direct confrontation with the enemy and Seaman Butler's Service Record of his twelve weeks and five days' on board ship therefore exhibit nothing other than the presumed routines of war-time duties.

He was then, on June 1 of 1915, to pass through the bureaucratic hands of HMS *Hermione*, an elderly cruiser recalled during that time of crisis to serve as guard-ship then depot ship at Southampton for the entirety of the conflict. Not twenty-four hours were to pass before he was posted elsewhere.

It was at the port of Milford Haven in the Principality of Wales that he was to be placed on the nominal roll of yet another yacht: HMS *Sabrina*, this again for only a very brief period: nine days, until June 11. Whether he was ever to set foot on the ship's deck is perhaps questionable.

(Right: Looking very similar to HMS 'Jeannette' cited further above, this is HMS 'Sabrina' possibly on war-time duty at Milford Haven. – from the *maritimequest.com* website)



Whatever the work at Milford Haven, Seaman Butler was back on the books of *Victory I* on June 12, from there two weeks later, June 26, to return to the Royal Navy Gunnery School, the nearby HMS *Excellent*, to which he had reported six months before upon his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland.

The length of Seaman Butler's stay at *Excellent* on Whale Island was to exceed the total of all his previous postings since he had disembarked from *Mongolian* in Glasgow on that day of late December of 1914. But what exactly his duties were to be during that eight-month period – apart from guns and gunnery – is not to be found documented among the scant collection of his personal papers.

Just more than a month into the New Year, 1916, he was transferred back to the mainland and to *Victory I* where he now remained – again perhaps some of the time only on paper – from February 5 until April 28.

By the time of the Great War, the Mediterranean island of Malta had been a British possession for a century and the Royal Navy during that period had created multiple facilities and a large base – HMS *Egmont* - centred around the Grand Harbour of the capital city, Valetta. As may be imagined from a glance at a map, the place was of great strategic value to a nation dependent on its maritime power.



(Preceding page: *The image of the Grand Harbour, Valetta, seen here just prior to the Great War is from a vintage post-card.*)

The dates recorded of Seaman Butler's posting to Malta are perhaps misleading as he was transferred *officially* from *Victory I* on April 28 of 1916, to join *Egmont* on the next day, April 29. However, it is a long way from the south coast of England to Malta, thus exactly when he reported there *to duty* is not at all clear as the records appear not to include the details of his travel.

HMS *Egmont* was the shore-based establishment at Valetta from which British naval operations were directed during the Great War. As mentioned above, from a glance at a map of the area, Malta is – and certainly historically was – of geographical and military importance; this implies that a great amount of naval activity was to emanate from there, up to and even after the Second World War, and until the island became independent in 1964.



HMS *Egmont* was in fact a castle known in English as the *Fort Saint Angelo* which formed a part of the fortifications which still encircle the harbour, defensive constructions built some four hundred years before, when the island was a possession of the *Knights of the Order of Saint John*.

(Right above: *A part of the Fort Saint Angelo complex in Valetta's Grand Harbour as it still exists – photograph from 2011*)

On the service records of Seaman the letters *RND* appear in parentheses adjacent to the name HMS *Egmont*; while what this signifies is not entirely clear, but it may suggest that Seaman Butler was dispatched to Malta, there to serve as a soldier of the Royal Naval Division*.

**During the Great War the number of volunteers for the Royal Navy was greater than the need for sailors. It was thus decided to form battalions of infantry with the superfluous numbers. There were eventually eight battalions which were to be formed into an infantry Division and, in 1916, transferred to the Army. However there were apparently some smaller units which were retained and used for naval interests.*

If indeed Seaman Butler was to become a soldier of the Royal Naval Division, he did so before it came under Army control.

How long Seaman Butler was to be posted to HMS *Egmont* before being attached to a ship is not clear. However, when he was, it was to the newly-launched – on April 12, 1916 – *Insect-Class* river gunboat HMS *Ladybird*.



(Right above: *The photograph of HMS 'Ladybird' at Port Saïd in November of 1917 is from the 'Wikipedia' web-site.*)

Originally envisaged to serve on the River Danube, by the time of *Ladybird's* launching this had of course become impossible, and she was now to serve in the Mediterranean,

perhaps also on the River Nile and the Suez Canal. But once again, there appears to be no information pertaining either to this or to Seaman Butler joining her complement – or in what capacity he did so.

When it was that Seaman Butler became ill is not clear; all that may be gleaned from his records is that it was likely in the late summer-early autumn, before mid-October. Nor is the complaint found among his papers – the term...*Pyrexia*...is documented, but that only refers to a high fever – a symptom, not the malady.

Seaman Butler was eventually admitted into the British 26th Stationary Hospital at Ismailia, a town situated on the west bank of the lakes half-way between Port Suez and Port Saïd, towns at the southern and northern ends of the Suez Canal.



(Right: *A tent-ward at an Australian medical facility, perhaps the Number 2 Stationary Hospital, stationed at Ismailia during the Great War – photograph from the Australian War Memorial web-site*)

The son of John Butler, former fisherman deceased from heart disease on October 16, 1898, and of Abigail Butler (née *Taylor**) of Cupids (Southside) in the District of Port de Grave, he was also brother to Anne-Maria, Robert and to Nathan.



**The couple had been married in the community of Burnt Head on January 5, 1891.*

Seaman Butler is recorded as having died of...*pyrexia* (see further above)...in the 26th Stationary Hospital at Ismailia on October 11 of 1916: Date of birth at Cupids, Newfoundland, September 6, 1894 (from his enlistment papers and a copy of Newfoundland Vital Statistics.

(Right above: *The United Church Cemetery in Cupids wherein is to be found a family memorial to the memory of Seaman William Butler. - photograph from 2010*)

(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 Butler 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 William Butler 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 22, 2023.