

CHAFFE, W. H.



Seaman William Henry Chafe, Number 1283x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to *answer the call* for volunteers by the naval authorities, William Henry Chafe relinquished his job as a fisherman in the community of Petty Harbour and travelled the short distance to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on October 31 of 1914, he reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same October 31 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 also underwent a satisfactory medical assessment. 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.***

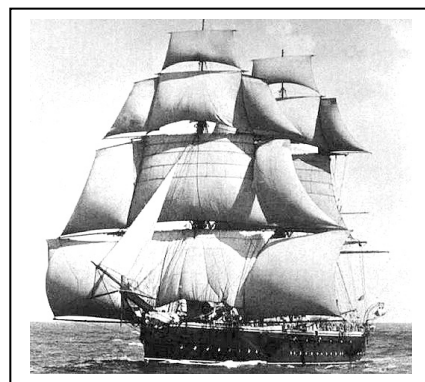
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion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

Following less than three weeks of training in St. John's, Seaman Chafe, 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 19th, its reservist passengers unmentioned in the local newspapers.

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



Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom it appears that while some few of the men were posted directly to a ship, the majority was ordered directly to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about November 28-29.

(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.)*



Seaman Chafe was to report to HMS *Pembroke**, the naval establishment at Chatham on the River Medway, itself a tributary of the better-known River Thames, and in the county of Kent. Not only was it a barracks – it operated from 1878 until 1983 – but it was the name given to a number of training establishments, mostly not far-removed from Chatham, which were numbered according to the purpose of the training – or otherwise - involved.

Pembroke I was the base for regular seamen and it was likely *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Chafe was to be attached, there to await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.

*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.

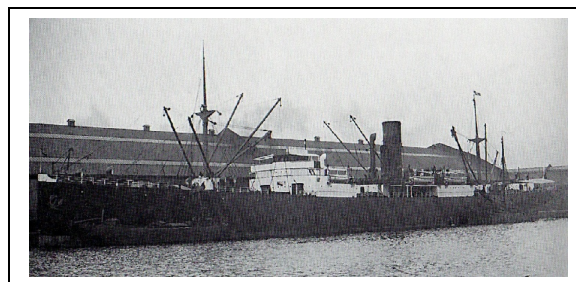
Thus the presence of elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments which were known as stone frigates. The ships were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, even thousands of men who laboured on shore.



(Right: A part 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)

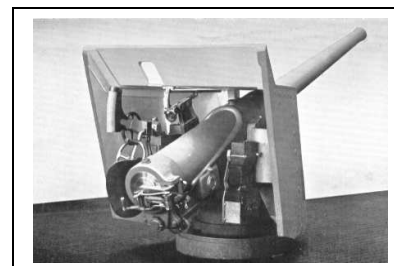
Which is why Seaman Chafe would likely have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' hat-band – until he joined 'Clan McNaughton'.

The ship to which Seaman Chafe was ordered on December 10-11 of that same 1914 was HMS *Clan McNaughton*, reportedly at Liverpool on December 4, likely the port from where she was to sail on patrol with the 10th Cruiser Squadron some days before that Christmas.



(Right above: The image of Clan MacNaughton – with unfortunately no further details - is from the Royal Marines History.com web-site.)

The vessel, a passenger-cargo ship of the *Clan Line*, had been hired by the British on November 19 of that autumn and had been fitted out with eight 4.7 inch naval guns for the purpose of serving as an armed merchant cruiser.



(Right: An example of the naval gun with which Clan McNaughton had been equipped prior to sailing on her war-time duties. – from Wikipedia)

But although a number of Newfoundland reservists had been sent upon arrival in the United Kingdom to train at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy's gunnery school, Seaman Chafe had not been among them and he was posted to *Clan McNaughton* to likely serve as an ordinary seaman.

Clan McNaughton was to be attached to the 10th Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force originally comprising out-of-date warships which by that January of 1915, unable to cope with the elements, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-cargo ships carrying a few guns as elderly as some of the ships on which they were mounted.

The ships of the 10th 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: in tempestuous winter months, even worse.

Even so, the first several weeks of her service appear to have been uneventful and *Clan McNaughton* apparently was to return to Liverpool on one if not two occasions before setting out to sea once again on what was to be her last voyage*.

**It appears not to be recorded whether she was in the company of 'Viknor' when that vessel left the Squadron to return to Liverpool in mid-January, not to be seen again before her discovery on the ocean floor almost a century later.*

The weather during that part of the winter of 1914-1915 was apparently foul and the last message from *Clan McNaughton*, sent by radio by her captain on February 3, was that the ship – on patrol off the north coast of Ireland and west of the Hebrides - was in...*terrible weather.*

She was not heard from again.

The cause of her loss has never been ascertained: she may simply have been the victim of the weather as reported by her captain; or perhaps, as originally thought, she had encountered a German mine although apparently the vessel was not particularly close to any mine-field.

A third theory suggests a combination of circumstances: the weather, perhaps a top-heavy ship because of the eight naval guns that she was carrying (just more than two tons per gun), and an inexperienced crew all may have contributed to her loss.

The son of Henry Richard Chafe, fisherman, and of Anna Chafe (also née *Chafe**) of Petty Harbour, then subsequently of Forest Pond Road in the Goulds, he was also brother to Herbert, George and to Ethel.

**The couple had married in the community of Petty Harbour on October 19, 1890.*

(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)

Seaman William Henry Chafe died on February 3, 1915, at the recorded age of twenty-one years: date of birth in Petty Harbour, Newfoundland, August 11 of 1894 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) but also August 8 of that same year (from his enlistment papers).

Seaman Chafe 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.

(continued)



Seaman William Henry Chafe 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.