

**Seaman James Charles Clarke, Service Number 2327x, is interred in St. James' Church of England Cemetery in Dover on the English Channel coast.**

**Having decided to answer the call of the Naval Authorities for volunteers, James Charles Clarke was to make his way from his place of residence in the Trinity Bay community of Chance Cove to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. There on September 3, 1917, he reported on board HMS *Briton*, the Drill Ship of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) which was moored there in the harbour (see further below).**

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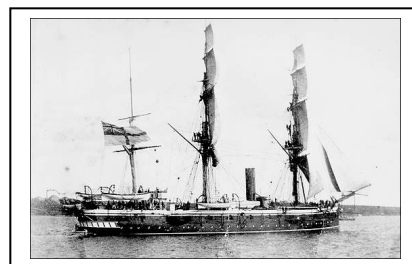
It was on that same autumn day, September 3, that James Charles Clarke enlisted, was engaged for the *Duration of the Conflict*, and underwent a medical assessment which pronounced him to be...*in every respect a fit and proper person to be enrolled in the Royal Naval Reserve*. It would also have been on or about this date that he was to have attested, 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.*)



Seaman Recruit Clarke was then likely to have undertaken the requisite twenty-eight day period of training - although there appear to be no dates of the event among his papers - on board His Majesty's Ship *Briton* which, until the previous year, had been HMS *Calypso* (see below).

(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)**

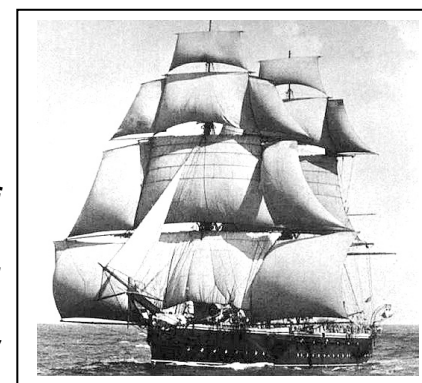
**Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.**



**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, 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.**



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**(Preceding page: 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)**



**(Right: The C-Class cruiser 'Calypso' of 1916, seen here on an un-recorded date during the later years of the Great War, was to be sunk by an Italian submarine in 1940. – from Wikipedia)**

It would have been on December 16 that Seaman Clarke, one of a small detachment of twenty-five Reservists and a single officer, boarded a train in St. John's for the trans-Island journey of some twenty-four hours to Port aux Basques. From there the detachment was to take the *Reid Newfoundland Company* steamship, the *SS Kyle*, late on the morrow evening evening for passage to North Sydney where the vessel arrived at five o'clock in the morning of December 18.

Having concluded the necessary immigration and medical formalities, Seaman Clarke and his fellow Reservists were to take another train, on this occasion to Halifax.

However, there appears to be no further information available pertaining to the remainder of Seaman Clarke's journey, this perhaps at least partially explained by the events in Halifax some two weeks prior.

On December 6 two ships, the Norwegian *Imo* and the French *Mont Blanc* had collided in the harbour, as a result of which the *Mont Blanc* had caught fire. She was laden with explosives and the subsequent explosion - reportedly the largest man-made explosion in history up until that time - devastated both the port and the city. More than seventeen-hundred were killed and nine-thousand hurt.



The down-town and waterside areas of the city were devastated and to add to the misery of the now-homeless, a major winter storm was unleashed upon them on the following day.

**(Right above: A view of an obliterated Halifax with its harbour in the distance, the photograph taken two days after the incident. – from 'Wikipedia')**



**(Right above: HMCS 'Niobe' – on which several Newfoundland Reservists were serving at the time - had sent one of its boats to the aid of 'Mont Blanc' before the ship exploded; when she did, all of the boat's crew were killed, as were some of those on board 'Niobe' itself – with several more hurt. 'Niobe' was damaged in the blast but was able to continue her functions in a diminished manner. – The photograph of a damage Niobe is from the Canadian War Museum web-site.)**

The importance of Halifax Harbour to the war effort meant that the return of some semblance of normal maritime traffic as soon as possible following the *Halifax Explosion* was a priority: within a week *some* shipping was already sailing from there and by the end of December most piers were in operation and by January had been repaired.

In the meantime, however the smaller east-coast Canadian ports of Saint John and Sydney had to shoulder extra duties, the transport of troops to the United Kingdom originally scheduled to pass through Halifax being one of them.

Seaman Clarke and his fellow Reservists may well have been affected in this manner.

When he and they were eventually to arrive in the United Kingdom, Seaman Clarke appears to have been ordered directly to report to the war-time Royal Navy Base established at the port of Dover\* - HMS *Attentive III* - and thence to one of His Majesty's ships, the paddle-steamer become mine-sweeper on which he was to serve for less than eleven months in service with the *Dover Patrol*.

*\*The coastal town of Dover lies on that part of the English coast which lies closest to France and the port-town of Calais. The Dover Straits, some thirty kilometres wide, allow vessels from the Baltic sea, from northern Europe and from the North Sea to have access to the English Channel – or 'La Manche' as the French call it – and from there the Atlantic Ocean. Today it is the world's second busiest waterway – and it was already critical to British interests at the time of the Great War.*



*Even some seventy years prior to that conflict the British had seen fit in the mid-nineteenth century to construct a harbour for commercial, for cross-Channel and for naval reasons. The port of Dover today is the main maritime link between the United Kingdom and the continent – and the more recently-constructed 'Chunnel' (Channel Tunnel) passes almost directly underneath it.*

*(Right above: One of the entrances to the port of Dover as seen from the Dover Straits with, flanking it to the right, the well-known White Cliffs – photograph from 2010)*

*With the Germans having occupied a part of the Belgian coast almost opposite Dover and with a goodly number of British vessels, both commercial and naval – to which should be added the troop transports which from there and from nearby Folkestone were, by the end of the War, to have carried some five million troops across to the Western Front – using the aforementioned waterway, the British created the 'Dover Patrol'.*



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***One of the biggest fears of the British was that the Germans would employ U-boats and torpedo-boats based on the Belgian coast to attack British shipping, and would also set mines in those waters. In fact they did, although it was the mines that were to become the greatest threat to shipping.***

***Thus began the 'Dover Patrol'. In its early days it was a motley collection of old, even obsolete, war-ships, for the most part destroyers, to which was very soon to be added a number of requisitioned and purpose-built small vessels, notably fishing-boats, trawlers and drifters, lightly-armed but capable of mine-sweeping and keeping their German opposite numbers at bay.***

***(Right above: Armed trawlers of the 'Dover Patrol' in the harbour at Dover – The undated photograph is from the Imperial War Museum web-site.)***

***The Dover Patrol rapidly became a large and important entity of Britain's naval defences and vessels from it were to be stationed not only at Dover but at other points around the nearby coast\*. Its base came to be known as HMS 'Attentive'.***

***\*HMS 'Ceto' was another facility at nearby Ramsgate where several Newfoundlanders serving in ships of the 'Dover Patrol' were based.***



**The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with HMS *Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base's parent ship\* and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser – or the also further above-mentioned trawler - to which Seaman Ayles was to be attached in that month of May of 1915.**

***(Right above: HMS 'Attentive', seen here at some time prior to the Great War during which she served as a cruiser of the Dover Patrol. The base reportedly was named after she became the parent ship because her Commanding Officer was to become senior officer of the Dover Patrol itself. – photograph from Wikipedia)***

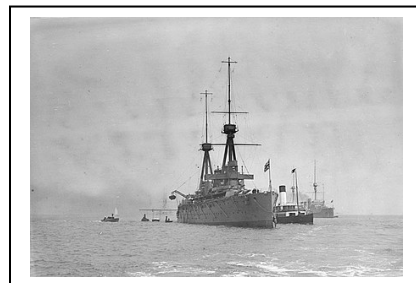
**What exactly his duties were to be during the first days of that posting to *Attentive III* does not appear to have been documented on the single page of Seaman Clarke's Service Record. He may have been attached to *Attentive III* herself or to a land-based facility which shared the same name: or he may have immediately joined the requisitioned mine-sweeper introduced in a previous paragraph, HMS *Duchess*.**



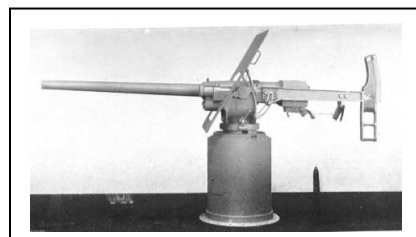
***(Right: Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the Great War: these were for the most part contact mines. U-boats were also used for this purpose – from the NavWeaps web-site)***

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(Right: *Prior to the Great War, HMS 'Invincible' is seen anchored at Spithead with, partially hidden on her port broadside, the passenger paddle steamer and later mine-sweeper, 'Duchess of Fife' – from the 'Wikiwand' web-site)*



The ship had been called into service in May of 1916 to be converted and armed to take advantage of her high speed, her manoeuvrability and her shallow draught – and her name abbreviated to simply *Duchess* (although her former name was still used on occasion) - for use during the remainder of the conflict. Prior to that she had worked, since her construction in 1899, primarily in Scotland as a passenger vessel in and about the *Firth of Clyde*.



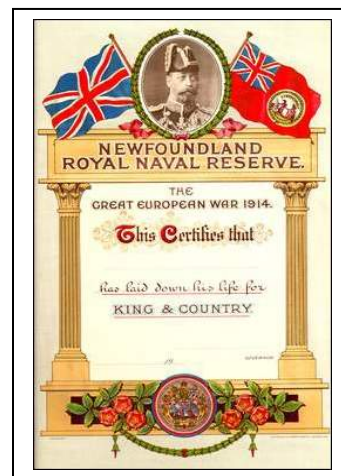
(Right above: *A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss 6-pounder gun, two of which were mounted on the 'Duchess' – from Wikipedia)*

The *Duchess of Fife* was to be re-requisitioned again some twenty years later, in the *Second World War* during which she served throughout in much the same capacity except for the four occasions in May-June of 1940 on which she was to evacuate British and French troops from the beaches of Dunkirk.

Seaman Clarke's service on board *HMS Duchess* appears to have offered little more than the everyday routines and rigours of war-time since nothing untoward appears documented on either his record or in the history of the ship itself until in or about that November of 1918.

At some time during this period he was to fall sick and was likely not to have been able to celebrate the coming into effect of the *Armistice* on November 11 with his fellows on board ship.

The Royal Navy Casualty Records of that November 13 briefly cite...*CLARKE, James C, Seaman, Newfoundland RNR, X 2327, illness*



(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)*

The son of John Clarke, fisherman, and of Maria Clarke (née *Smith*) of Chance Cove, he was also brother to Mary-Rachel, William, Maria-Elizabeth and to Hedley.

*\*The couple had married on November 3, 1884.*

Seaman James Charles Clarke is reported as having died at sea from pneumonia on November 13 of 1918 at the age of nineteen years: date of birth in Chance Cove, Newfoundland, October 15, 1898 (from his enlistment papers).

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***Seaman Clarke 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 James Charles Clarke was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).**



**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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 22, 2023.**