



COURAGE AT SEA

Newfoundland Sailors in the Great War



NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Robert C. Parsons

Courage at Sea

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NEWFOUNDLAND SAILORS IN THE GREAT WAR

ROBERT C. PARSONS

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PREFACE

Winston Churchill knew about the tough and fearless Newfoundland sailors from both great wars. When hostilities began leading up to World War II, England's Royal Navy asked Newfoundland's Commission of Government to recruit 625 experienced fishermen or seamen for special service in the Northern Patrol, which guarded North Atlantic shipping lanes.

Churchill had a special interest in the recruitment for the second war, calling Newfoundlanders "The hardiest and most skilful boatmen in rough seas who exist."

Churchill spoke from experience. As First Lord of the Admiralty from 1911-1915 and subsequent member of Britain's cabinet, he knew well those Newfoundland seamen had faithfully guarded, protected, and fought for Britain during the Great War at sea in World War I.

On August 2, 1914, Commander Anthony MacDermott of HMS *Calypso*, then a training ship stationed in St. John's harbour, was advised that the Admiralty had issued an order calling the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserves (often referred to in some sources as well as in this volume of stories as the RNRs, or Reservists) to active duty. MacDermott was instructed to put the order into reality.

Copies of the order were posted in St. John's, and outpost magistrates were requested by telegraph to make the news public.

Commander MacDermott, the senior naval officer for Newfoundland, observed that "This was the height of the fishing season and to be called away from their work at this time naturally entailed great hardship and serious financial loss to these poor fellows."

Someone said to MacDermott, "You'll never get them! You can't expect men to give up their livelihood for a war they know nothing about, and in which they have no concern."

I did get them, said MacDermott afterwards. "Every man-jack of them, and with no trouble at all though many of them had to walk fifty or sixty miles to the nearest steamer or railway station . . . the finest seamen in the British Empire . . . the whole world."

The 491 trained seamen immediately available for active service were soon assigned to British and Canadian ships. When the war was over, other accolades of RNRs came in; one from Admiral of the British Fleet, Sir Roger Keyes, ". . . They are hearty people . . . who carried out arduous and dangerous work . . . [Newfoundland] breeds a splendid seafaring race." Keyes's complete address is found in Appendix A.

At home, the Reservists became endeared to the general public, especially when accounts came back of many battles won, a few lost. With reference to their colour reflective of their ties to the British Navy, they were often said to be "the boys in blue." Boys in blue that had survived. Others who would never come back home.

In all, 1,964 men of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve saw active service during the Great War. Sailors from the Reserve served in every flotilla and squadron in the war zone and earned high praise everywhere, particularly in their handling of small craft.

Many of them drowned or perished; many became heroes; many toiled in relative obscurity.

As well, good reader, this series of stories also brings merchant seamen to the forefront. These were the men who carried vital, lifesaving provisions to England and Europe or delivered dangerous war materials to Allied bases. In the beginning the merchant marine sailors did not always get the credit and honour due them.

The ships these sailors manned were usually unarmed, small sailing ships (and often unescorted) and sailed through dangerous waters. The merchant sailors themselves were not trained in wartime survival or defence skills and carried no weapons of war. Yet, while

the warships fought the battles, the merchant supply ships brought the food and supplies to hungry people.

The war at sea was into its second year when local papers announced that merchantmen, i.e. sailing schooners, could become victims of war. One such article, right, appeared in the *St. John's Daily Star* on February 2, 1916. But the declaration "they could and would be sunk on sight" didn't stop the Newfoundland fish merchants, nor did it hinder them from finding sailors to sail through dangerous waters.

Nearly a score of Newfoundland sailing ships was stopped by German raiders or submarines in the four years of war. All were torpedoed or shelled and left to sink. Many of the crews were forced into dories or lifeboats to row to land, sometimes many miles away. In a couple of instances, the crew was taken prisoner and incarcerated in German POW camps.

And from these merchant vessels the crews returned to tell the tale. Other vessels were stopped, sunk, and the entire

crew was killed or they perished at sea, as revealed later in German war records or from circumstantial evidence of the events.

This volume of tales is about both classes, the Reservists (RNR) and the merchant marines, for they were all courageous and industrious seamen who went beyond the call of duty. Several stories were collected and rewritten from my previous books. Other stories were researched, written, and presented here for the first time.

Those accounts taken from earlier books have been updated, augmented, clarified, or put in context with the events of the time—Newfoundlanders at sea in the Great War: World War I.

I arbitrarily chose to use the word "Newfoundland," for in those



years our land was commonly called just that and was a British dominion at the time. As well, in this work I did not attempt to outline the history, causes, or outcomes of World War I. It has been done by others much more qualified than I. The lead-ins to each chapter are designed to provide some marine background to basic wartime events.

Of course, not all stories of heroism and duty of the Great War at sea can be told in a volume of this size. If I have made any errors or omissions in data, dates, names, spelling of names, sources, acknowledgements, photo credits, or other information, please notify me and corrections will be made in any subsequent reprints. Any error in information, oversight, or incorrect crediting was purely unintentional.

One final personal note, good reader. When I was in my early teens and living with my parents and sisters on Ralph Street in Grand Bank, my father, Charlie, was quitting the sea after forty-plus years. He, then about sixty years old, began work in the local fish plant, and that meant he was home permanently instead of making the intermittent visits of a sailor.

I recall hearing a discussion with my mother and sisters centring around his applying for a government pension or monetary allowance based on his experiences at sea. He had been to sea during World War I and during World War II, sailing through dangerous waters in both conflicts. Now, by the late 1950s, merchant sailors could apply for pensionable status as a merchant marine war veteran.

He chose to base his application or documentation on his Great War voyages with shipmate Clarence Williams (born in Pool's Cove, lived in Grand Bank, later St. John's). Williams, by now a qualified captain and certified navigational instructor, could verify his merchant marine standing, the ship *Mary D. Young* and others, the dates of his sailing in 1918, and his foreign ports of call in Portugal, Spain, Canada, the United States, and Saint Pierre.

My father had not signed up (that I know of) for World War I, although at the time he was of prime age, between sixteen to twenty years old, and had no physical or mental impairments. You see, his mother (and my grandmother, Emmaline Matthews Parsons) had

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passed away when he was thirteen and he stayed home from school to care for his younger sisters and to make sure they were fed, clothed, and went to school. Their father, John Robert (my grandfather), like most Newfoundland breadwinners, was away fishing.

Thus Charlie was a primary caregiver and not required to enlist. Accordingly, he was not a Royal Navy Reservist nor a member of the Newfoundland Regiment. But, as his sisters grew older and were able to care for themselves, he went overseas, at age nineteen, on the Samuel Harris Limited schooner *Mary D. Young*. He was a cook (he jokingly called it “galley slave”), a livelihood learned while caring for his younger sisters, Fanny, Dinah, and Rose.

He sailed through the sub-infested waters of the North Atlantic, especially off Portugal and near Gibraltar. In fact, the only time he was shipwrecked—in forty years at sea—and nearly lost his life was on *Mary D. Young*. It stemmed from an oddity related to wartime regulations. And it happened two or three days after Armistice Day.

It’s a pleasure of mine to say that his story as a merchant sailor and his shipwreck caused by a quirk in wartime regulations is included in *Courage at Sea: Newfoundland Sailors in the Great War*.

It’s also an opportune time to dedicate this volume of sea stories to all those tough, brave Reservists and merchant marines and to dedicate it to one in particular—Charlie Forward Parsons, merchant marine, WWI. A certain image of him is found on page 207.

August 2014

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— 1914–1915 —

August 4, 1914: Declaration of First World War. By the fall of 1914, in response to the threat of German submarines in the Western Atlantic, the HMS *Calypso* (later the *Briton*) provided small, quick-firing guns to the Newfoundland-Labrador Patrol, a group of small crafts designed to protect shipping interests around Newfoundland shores.

HMS *Briton*'s former Commanding Officer, Anthony MacDermott, on answering the call to recruit Naval Reservists and in paying tribute to those Reservists under his command, said: "Newfoundlanders took to naval life and routine like ducks to water. . . . Their conduct was uniformly exemplary, punishments were practically unknown, and every order was carried out with cheerful alacrity and seamanlike intelligence. . . . I may say, indeed, that there were no smarter-looking men in the whole service."

October 1914. Thirty Newfoundland Naval Reservists departed on SS *Franconia* for England. Many others followed in the coming months. These men served in the Mediterranean, the Dardanelles, and the North Sea and were given duties on various ships in the British Admiralty.

February 4, 1915. Germany declared a war zone around Great Britain, effecting a submarine blockade where even neutral merchant vessels were to be potential targets.

1914-15. Naval mines, now becoming more sophisticated and more deadly, were placed in shipping lanes around Britain. The first battleship sinking in the war was that of HMS *Audacious* after it struck a mine on October 27, 1914. Among the first Newfoundland merchant sailors to die from mines were probably those on SS *Sharon*, which disappeared in December 1914.

March 9, 1915. A letter of sympathy was published in the St. John's *Evening Telegram* from the British Admiralty regarding the loss of twenty-three Newfoundland Royal Naval Reservists on board HMS *Clan MacNaughton* after it supposedly foundered in the North Sea.

By 1915, Britain implemented a defence that became known as the "Q-ships," or decoy vessels, which were heavily armed merchant ships with concealed weaponry, designed to lure submarines into making surface attacks, giving Q-ships the chance to open fire and sink them.

THE FIRST NEWFOUNDLAND SEAMEN TO MAKE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

September 1914

IN THE FOURTH WEEK OF September 1914, Newfoundland learned of the first great sea disaster of the war. News came that British cruisers had been sunk by the enemy and there were many casualties. Newfoundland's newly recruited Royal Naval Reservists had not yet been shipped overseas. Accordingly, no news was expected of death from those ranks.

However, the next day local papers published The Roll of Honour, detailing the career of a Newfoundlander who had perished in the attack. It was Lieutenant Commander Bernard Harvey of St. John's, an officer on HMS *Cressy*. Harvey, belonging to St. John's, had been educated at Bishop Feild College and joined the England's Royal Navy in 1912.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war, the cruisers *Cressy*, *Hogue*, and *Aboukir* were in the North Sea in support of a force of destroyers based at Harwich, England. They were blocking the eastern end of the English Channel from German warships attempting to attack the supply route between England and France.

In fact, these three ships were about to be decommissioned, retired from sea duty. That particular class of ship was becoming obsolete due to advances in naval architecture. However, at the outbreak of war they had a role to play and were staffed by reserve sailors from England.

On September 22, the three cruisers were steaming in a line when they were spotted by the German submarine *U-9*. Although they were not zigzagging in a defensive manoeuvre, all of the ships had lookouts posted to search for periscopes, and one gun (afterward deemed to be woefully inadequate) on each side of each ship was manned.

Unseen, *U-9* submerged and closed the range on the unsuspecting British ships. At close range, the sub directed a single torpedo at *Aboukir*. The torpedo broke its back, and *Aboukir* sank within twenty minutes, with the loss of 527 men.

The captains of *Cressy* and *Hogue* thought *Aboukir* had struck a floating mine and came forward to assist her. They stood by and began to pick up survivors. At this point, the sub fired two torpedoes into *Hogue*, mortally wounding that ship.

As *Hogue* sank, the captain of *Cressy*, realizing that the squadron was being attacked by a submarine, tried to flee. The orders to leave the scene of a sinking was a new British war regulation, enacted to avoid another loss of ship and men.

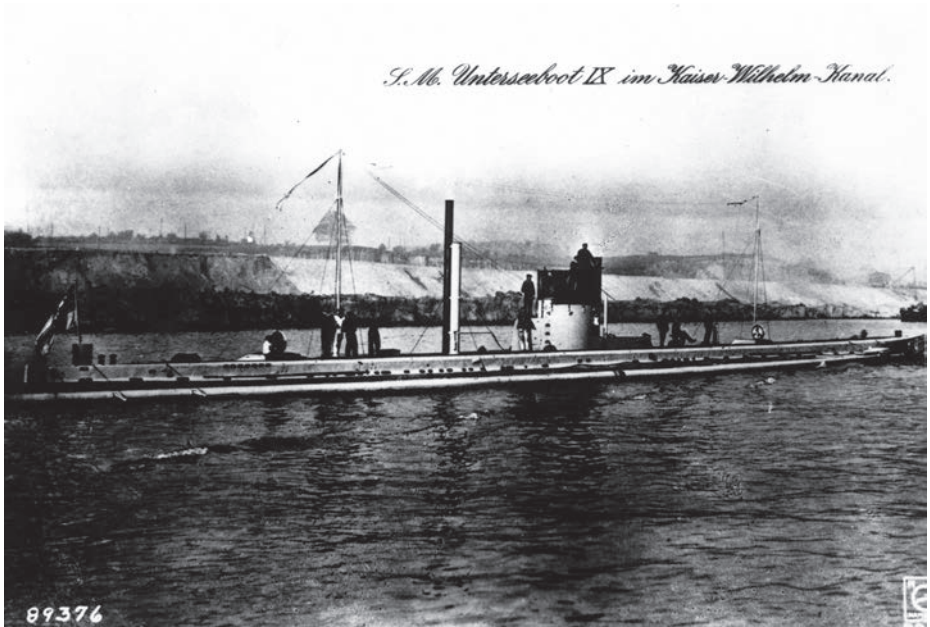
However, before *Cressy* got away, two torpedoes struck that cruiser, sinking it as well. A great number of men were rescued by HMS *Lowestoft* and by a little flotilla of patrol boats and armed trawlers. But among the missing was Bernard Harvey.

In his overview, “Newfoundland’s Part in the Great War” in *The Book of Newfoundland Volume One*, Captain Leo C. Murphy says of Harvey:

Bernard Mathieson Harvey, RN, who died on HMS *Cressy*, was the first Newfoundlander to make the supreme sacrifice in Great World War.

The entire engagement with the sub had lasted less than two hours and cost the British three warships, sixty-two officers, and 1,397 sailors. Up to that time, the British Admiralty considered submarines as mere novelties, toys that would not amount to much in a war at sea. The battle silenced that opinion and established the submarine as a major weapon in the conduct of naval warfare.

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U-9 in the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal in Northwest Germany. In years leading up to World War I, German technology put their submarines, often called U-boats, at the forefront as a war machine. In 1906, the German Navy was one of the first to adapt the diesel engine to a sub, providing an underwater craft with a means of strong propulsion. With the development of the periscope and the self-propelling torpedo, U-boats became a formidable foe in naval warfare. One of the noteworthy engagements of U-9 was the sinking of *Cressy*, *Hogue*, and *Aboukir*. (Photo courtesy United States National Archives, Washington, DC)

Britain, at this time, relied heavily on raw materials and certain manufactured goods imported from Canada and Newfoundland, including pig iron from the Sydney iron smelting plants. In the English factories the iron was reworked into finished products, both for domestic use and for armaments. Enemy subs and mines now added a new threat to importation from overseas.

One of the ships that delivered iron from Sydney, Nova Scotia, to England's ports was the 3,000-ton SS *Sharon*, commanded by Captain Cochrane of Nova Scotia.

Sharon, built in Britain and owned in Canada, left North Sydney November 14, 1914, on a journey to Newport, Wales. Of the crew

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