

GOWER REMEMBERS

Seaman Samuel Sparks

(1899-1916)



HM Trawler *Dagon*, the ship Sparks was a crew member of when it struck a mine and sank with all hands lost on December 08, 1916.

“I regret to inform you that an Admiralty telegram has been received stating that the trawler “Dagon” had been sunk by a mine and that Samuel Sparkes [sic], Seaman, was missing and believed killed.

*A. MacDermott, Act. Commander.”
(The Evening Telegram, December 11, 1916)*

Samuel Sparks was born in St. John's on April 10, 1899, the youngest of eight children of Susanna Cook (1859-1938) and Ebenezer Sparks (1850-1901). The elder Sparks was originally from Lower Island Cove but had moved to St. John's by 1881, when he and Susanna were married on December 15 of that year. He worked as a labourer and died of la grippe, a form of influenza, on February 23, 1901, at the age of 50.

Samuel was less than two years old at the time of his father's death. It is not known what his mother did to support her very large family in the months following her husband's death. She eventually remarried, to a widower named Henry Janes, whose wife had died some time previous. She was 44; he was 55. Their marriage took place at Gower Street Methodist Parsonage on November 10, 1902; the ceremony was performed by the Rev. Humphrey P. Cowperthwaite.

It is not known which school Samuel attended. His name does not appear in class lists for the Methodist College that appear each year in *The Collegian* magazine. It is possible that he attended another school in St. John's.

Sparks first attempted to become part of the war effort early in 1916. The February 29 edition of *The Evening Telegram* for that year lists him as one of 25 new recruits who had signed up during the previous week at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's. Someone in authority must have realized that he was two years underage, being only 16 at the time, and rejected his offer to become part of the Newfoundland Regiment. That did not stop Sparkes, however. Less than a month later, on March 24, he enlisted in the Royal Naval Reserve, which was headquartered in St. John's aboard HMS *Calypso*. He number in the Reserve was 2407X.

He did not remain in St. John's too long after he enlisted, although when and how he made it to England is unknown. Once there he was assigned to the crew of the HM Trawler *Dagon*.

The HM Trawler *Dagon* was a former fishing vessel built by Smith's Dock Company Ltd., South Bank, Middlesbrough, and launched in 1914. It was owned and operated for the first year of its existence by the Consolidated Steam Fishing & Ice Company, of Grimsby, in Lincolnshire. In 1915, it was sold to the Royal Navy and was converted into a minesweeper. As such it patrolled the North Sea and coastal areas of the British Isles looking to detect and neutralize underwater mines that had been set by German submarines.

According to Andy Pare in his 2015 book *Call the Hands*, which is an account of seamen from Bridlington, Yorkshire, who lost their lives in the First World War: "*In World War I, Royal Navy warships still received Prize Bounty Money for the sinking or capture of enemy ships. Warships and auxiliaries also received Salvage Money for saving ships, cargoes and ship's boats.*" He mentioned this because one of the seamen he writes about, Alfred Burgess, was a crewman on the *Dagon* when it salvaged the wreck of the SS *Angelica Maersk* on November 22-23, 1916. Pare also writes that there was a notice in *The London Gazette* for October 16, 1917, which stated that the naval salvage money that had accrued from the salvage of the *Angelica Maersk* was intended for the crew of the *Dagon*, but there was no indication that it was paid to these men's next of kin.

While it is not certain if Sparks was a crewman on the *Dagon* at the time of the salvage of the *Angelica Maersk*, he was on board that ship on December 08, 1916, just 15 days later. It was on that day that the *Dagon* struck a submerged mine off the Royal Sovereign Light Vessel. A light vessel is a ship that acts as a lighthouse. This one marked the Royal Sovereign Shoal, off Eastbourne, East Sussex, from 1875 until it was replaced by a stationary lighthouse in 1971.

The mine that the *Dagon* struck had been laid by the German submarine *UC-21*. All twelve persons on board were lost. The wreck site

was positively identified and is considered to be a war grave under the auspices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Having no land-based grave, Samuel Sparks's name is on the Beaumont Hamel Memorial Plaque, which commemorates the sacrifice of 820 Newfoundland soldiers, sailors and seamen from World War 1 who have no known grave. There is an exact replica of that plaque in Bowring Park, in St. John's.

Sparks was remembered by his family in St. John's in the years following his death. The following notice appeared in *The St. John's Daily Star*, four days after his death, on December 12, 1916:

“SPARKS – Killed somewhere in the North Sea, Samuel Sparks, R.N., aged 18½ years, youngest son of Susanna and the late Ebenezer Sparks. Left to mourn him are a mother, three sisters and four brothers.

*Oh God who rules the Heaven fair,
The changing sea and land,
Our stubborn hearts with grace prepare
To learn and understand.*

*To wait and watch though hope be dead
The coming from the sea,
The mother's lot, who, with bowed head,
Weeps over tragedy.*

Toronto and Boston papers please copy.”

That last line would indicate that he had relatives, most likely some of his siblings, living in those cities. And despite the age given in this newspaper notice and elsewhere, he was not 18½ or 19 at the time of his

death. He was 17 years and eight months old, still only a boy who had craved adventure and who lied about his age to serve his country.

IN MEMORIAM.

In loving remembrance of my dear son, Samuel Sparkes [*sic*], R.N.R., drowned in the North Sea, Dec. 8th, 1916.

Cherished memories of one so dear,
Often recalled by a silent tear.
Only those who loved and lost,
Can understand the bitter cost.

We who loved him sadly miss him,
As it dawns another year;
In our lonely hours of thinking,
Thoughts of him are very near.

This is another “In Memoriam” inserted by his mother, which appeared in *The Evening Telegram* on December 10, 1923, some seven years after his death.



Members of the Royal Naval Reserve in front of the barracks to house recruits that was built on the deck of HMS *Calypso*. Samuel Sparks may be one of the men in this picture.

On Sunday, November 16, 2014, Gower Street United Church initiated a program of commemoration that will last for approximately four to five years. On roughly every second Sunday through to the end of 2018, a brief write-up on one of these individuals, similar to this one, will appear as an insert in the Bulletin and there will be a reference to that person in the service. In this way, we hope to recognize their contribution to the war effort, the many sacrifices they made, some with their very lives, and the debt of gratitude we owe to each of them.

We also hope to learn more about them from their descendants or other relatives, thereby fostering a link between our past and our present, as we begin our 203rd year as a faith community.

If you know of any relatives of these servicemen and women please contact Bert Riggs at briggs@mun.ca or at 726-6169.