

GOWER REMEMBERS

Allan Edgar Hancock

(1881-1917)



“The burial with full naval honors of Royal Naval Reservist Alan Hancock took place yesterday afternoon at the General Protestant Cemetery. The body was enclosed in a beautiful casket, covered with the Union Jack and floral offerings, and was drawn on a gun carriage by a squad of bluejackets from H.M.S. Briton. A firing party from the Briton with reversed arms preceded the gun carriage, followed by the C.L.B. Band, which rendered the Dead March in Saul. Rev. T. B. Darby officiated at the graveside, and after the service had been read the firing party discharged their arms, and the “Last Post” was sounded.” (The St. John’s Daily Star, Jun 06, 1917)

Alan Edgar Hancock¹ was born in James Cove, Bonavista, on November 16, 1881, the son of Elizabeth and George Hancock. There were at least two other siblings: a daughter, Mary Jane (born November 16, 1870) and a brother George (born September 30, 1877). The elder Hancock, originally from nearby Knights Cove, was a fisherman in the Bonavista area until he moved his family to St. John's sometime in the later years of the 19th century. His name first appears in the St. John's directory for the period 1894-1897, as a carpenter residing at 32 Angel Place.

Alan's name first appears in a city directory in 1898, where he is recorded as a labourer, boarding with his parents at 13 Howe Place. His next appearance in the public record indicates that he managed to get himself into some serious trouble in the late Summer of 1901. A report from the Police (magistrate's) Court that appeared in *The Evening Telegram* on September 30, 1901 notifies the public that among other individuals who appeared before Judge Conroy that day was Alan Hancock, age 19, a labourer from George Street, who was sentenced to six months' hard labour in His Majesty's Penitentiary for stealing a pair of pants, valued at \$2.50, the property of a Mr. Byrne.

It is unknown how long he actually served or what he did in the first months after his release, but by the end of 1902, he had made a life-altering decision. The British Navy corvette HMS *Calypso* was brought to St. John's in 1902, where it served as a training ship for the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve (RNR). The RNR had been founded two years previous as part of an experiment to train needed men for the Royal Navy's ships. The men would receive a stipend for enlisting in the Reserve, would be trained and on call for the defence of the British Empire when needed. Their training took place during the Winter, so that those who made their primary living from the fishery could still do so in season. The *Calypso* was renamed HMS *Briton* in 1916.

Hancock was one of the first men to join up after the *Calypso* arrived in St. John's: on December 19, 1902. He remained a part of the RNR until the outbreak of the war in 1914. In 1911, he was one of 20 Reservists who

¹ Some times the family name is spelled Handcock and sometimes Alan's first name is spelled Allan.

sailed to England on the SS *Mongolian* on the night of June 03, to take part in the Coronation Ceremony of King George V and Queen Mary. During the time when he was not in training, Hancock worked in a number of jobs, one of which he probably acquired training for while in prison: a broommaker.

He was also one of the first members of the Reserve to transfer to the Royal Navy early in the war. He left St. John's aboard the RMS *Franconia* on November 06, 1914, where he was assigned to the converted fishing trawler *Bodino* as chief gunner. As such he was crucial to the *Bodino's* success in sending a German submarine to the bottom of the North Sea.

Later Hancock was transferred to the HMS *Laurentic*, a former White Star ocean liner that had been converted into an armed merchant cruiser for war service. He was one of 459 people aboard that ship, en route from Liverpool to Halifax in January 1917, when it struck two mines off the coast of Ireland on January 25, and sank. More than 75% of those on board, some 354 individuals, both civilian and military personnel, were drowned. Hancock was one of the lucky 105 people who was rescued. At the time of the sinking, the *Laurentic* was carrying approximately 43 tons of gold bars, of which only 20 were ever recovered. For his service as a member of the Royal Navy he received a commendation from the Admiralty and was given an extended furlough.

Hancock and five other Newfoundlanders who were on the *Laurentic* arrived in St. John's on March 07, 1917. Upon their arrival, His Excellency, Governor Sir Walter Davidson, "*paid a due mood of praise to the men on their loyalty and patriotism, extolled their bravery and referred to their ability as seaman and regretted the loss of so many of their brave companions on shipboard. Their names however would be handed down to further generations as the personification of all that was brave, loyal and true and those who mourned them would find consolation in the knowledge that they had sacrificed their lives in a just and noble cause.*"

The men heartily cheered His Excellency and Lady and after being served with refreshments were driven to their homes to report today on board the Briton.” (The St. John’s Daily Star, March 07, 1917)

During the three months that followed, Hancock was attached to HMS *Briton* in St. John’s Harbour. On June 01, he was admitted to the St. John’s General Hospital to undergo treatment for a growth in his throat. The treatment proved unsuccessful and he died the following day. He was buried from his residence on Haggerty Street and interred in the General Protestant Cemetery on June 05. A description of his funeral appeared in *The Evening Telegram* the following day.

Veteran Reservist Laid To Rest.

The funeral of Royal Naval reservist Alan Hancock took place yesterday afternoon from his late home, Haggerty Street, to the General Protestant Cemetery. The remains enclosed in a handsome casket of battleship grey with silver mountings and covered with the Union Jack and floral wreaths was placed on a gun carriage by a squad of Reservists from H.M.S. Briton who also acted as pall-bearers. The procession was as follows:-

Firing Squad with arms reversed.

C.L.B. Band.

Bluejackets drawing gun carriage.

Relatives of deceased.

Royal Naval Reservists.

Ship’s Company.

Officers of H.M.S. Briton.

Commander MacDermott, R.N.

Citizens in General.

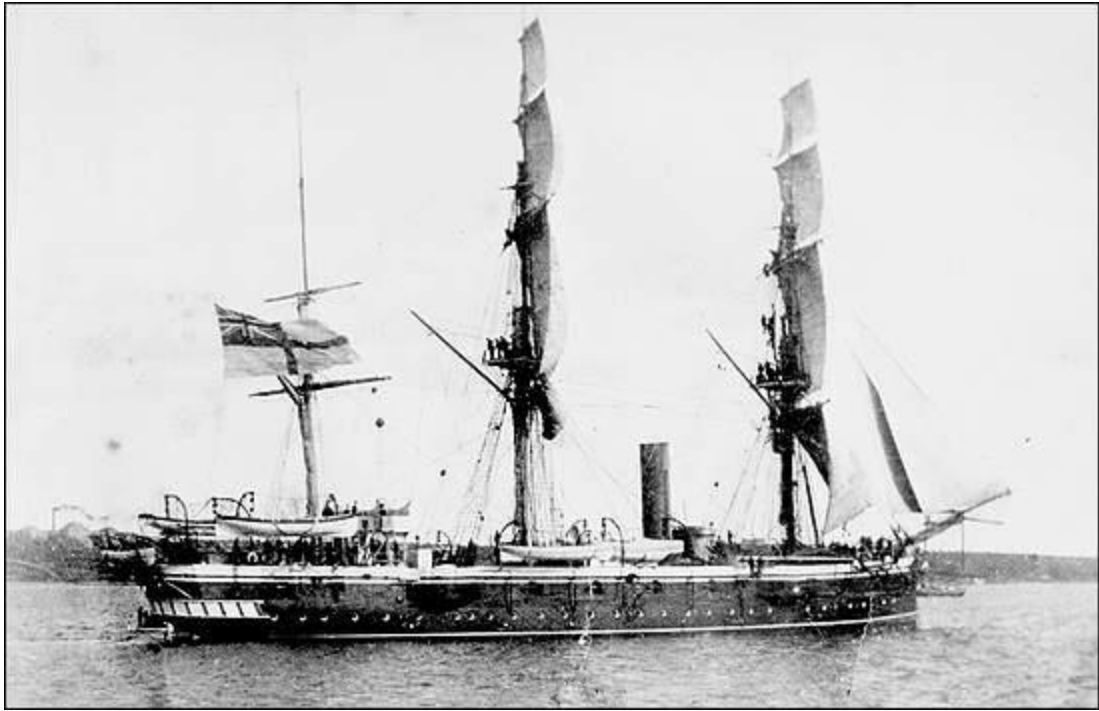
The burial service was conducted by Rev. T. B. Darby, B.A., assisted by Rev. N.M. Guy, at the close of which the firing squad fired three farewell volleys while a bugler from the Newfoundland Regiment sounded the “Last Post.”

Yesterday’s turn out of Naval Reservists was the largest seen in the city in some time.

Included in the many floral offerings was a wreath from the Commander and Officers of H.M.S. Briton, a cross from the ship's company and an anchor from the Newfoundland Naval Reserve.” (The Evening Telegram, June 06, 1917)

At the time of his death, Alan Hancock was one of the longest serving member of the Newfoundland Naval Reserve, having served for 14 years, 5½ months.

Alan Hancock married Fanny Dawe of St. John's at the Gower Street Methodist Parsonage on September 13, 1905. They had three children: a daughter, Mary Alice Gertrude, who was born on March 03, 1909; a second daughter, Estella Mary, born on August 30, 1911; and a son, Eli, who was born on May 22, 1914. Both daughters died before their father, Estella Mary on November 27, 1912 at age 15 months. Notices published at the time of Hancock's death list his “*wife, one son, mother, brother and a large circle of friends to mourn their loss.*” (The Evening Telegram, June 05, 1917)



HMS *Calypso* in St. John's Harbour, 1908.



HMS *Laurentic*

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 the list, 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.