



**Captain\* Eric Stanley Ayre lies in Ancre British Cemetery – Grave reference II. E. 12.**

***\*Officers who were eventually promoted from the ranks may be identified from their Regimental Number. Other officers who were not from the ranks received the King's Commission, or in the case of those in the Newfoundland Regiment, an Imperial Commission, and were not considered as enlisted. These officers thus had no Regimental Number allotted to them.***

***And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist 'for the duration', even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.***

The occupation of Eric Stanley Ayre before service in the Newfoundland Regiment was as a director of *Ayre & Sons Ltd.*, St. John's merchants. Having been appointed Musketry Training Officer for the months of October and November of 1914, he was granted a temporary Imperial Commission to the rank of Lieutenant during that same period. His appointment in rank was confirmed on or about December 2, thus...*you are eligible to apply to join the next draft for the front, if circumstances permit.*

It is likely that the above missive was a reply to a letter that he had penned on November 26 to Sir Walter Davidson, Governor of the Dominion of Newfoundland:

*Sir,*

*While assisting to train in musketry the First Nfld. Regiment during the time of their camping at Pleasantville, I received the commission of Lieutenant, but do not know whether this commission would hold good for the second Contingent, now about to be recruited.*

*It is my wish to go forward with this Contingent, and I should like to be informed if it be necessary for me to make a fresh application, or whether the former appointment would be official for the present occasion also.*

*I have the honour to be  
Your obedient servant*

**Eric S. Ayre**

No further application was to be necessary and subsequently Lieutenant Ayre received further promotion with an appointment to the rank of captain on January 26, 1915.

Three months following, and now as its Commanding Officer, Captain Ayre embarked for overseas service with the two-hundred forty-nine other officers and *other ranks* of 'E' Company onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax.

Days later, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening, the detachment began the trans-Atlantic passage on board His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool, arriving in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded although the second may well be the date of disembarkation.

The Newfoundlanders on this occasion were to sail from Halifax in the company of the Canadian Army Service Corps Railway Supply Depot.

(Right above: *The image of 'Stephano' passing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is shown by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(continued)



(Preceding page: *The image of 'Missanabie' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries website. The vessel was of the Canadian Pacific Line and, although transporting troops during the Great War, did so on her commercial services which continued during the conflict. On September 9, 1918, she was torpedoed and sunk off the south coast of Ireland with the loss of forty-five lives.*)

From Liverpool the contingent travelled northwards by train to the Scottish capital, Edinburgh where, on May 4, 'E' Company joined 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies which had already taken up station as the garrison at the historic Castle, the first troops from outside the British Isles ever to do so.



(Right: *The venerable bastion of Edinburgh Castle dominates the Scottish capital from its hill in the centre of the city. – photograph from 2011*)

Exactly one week after the arrival of 'E' Company in the Scottish capital city, the entire Newfoundland contingent, on May 11, was posted to *Stobs Camp* some dozen kilometres from the Scottish town of Hawick, and to the south-east of Edinburgh.

On that day Captain Ayre took a taxi from Hawick to the *Camp*. He also wrote in a letter that it was...*a rotten day with snow on the hills*. However, the weather would improve and the Battalion would remain at *Stobs Camp* for some three months, until the four senior companies – 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' - moved south at the beginning of August, on the third day of the month, to England, to Aldershot, for a final two weeks of training – and a royal inspection.



(Right above: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915 – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)

While 'A', 'B', 'C', and 'D' Companies were being posted to Aldershot, thence to depart for service in the campaign on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*, most of the personnel of 'E' Company – and the later-arrived 'F' Company – would be sent to the new Regimental Depot.

Captain Ayre went with them.

In a more personal vein, it had been during the period while he was serving at *Stobs Camp*, that Captain Ayre had married his fiancé from Newfoundland, Janet Morrison Miller. She was to spend the following year living with her mother-in-law in Glasgow.

The Depot, at the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland was, by the time of Captain Ayre's arrival, still very much in the throes of being established; in fact, 'E' and 'F' Companies comprised the first contingent to be posted there. Ayr was to serve as the overseas base for the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion from where – as of November of that 1915 until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts would be despatched to bolster the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.

(Right: An aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were quartered the ‘other ranks’, is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right. – by courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr)



(Right below: The High Street in Ayr as shown on a postcard of the time, the imposing Wallace Tower: it stands to this day (2017) - dominating the scene. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo)



At the end of March of 1916, a large detachment of officers and *other ranks*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr, was to make its way via Southampton across the English Channel to France where, after several days of final training at Rouen, it would report to duty with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment in mid-April. A goodly number of this unit would have been personnel of ‘E’ Company – its Commanding Officer was soon to follow.



(Right: *British troops disembarking for the British Expeditionary Force Depot at Rouen en route to the Western Front* – from *Illustration*)

Some nine months after his ‘E’ Company had reported to Ayr in the summer of 1915, Captain Ayre travelled from Scotland to join the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion in France. Having made and signed his will in Scotland on May 13, he had arrived on the Continent, likely at Rouen, by May 19, on the day after the Newfoundlanders of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, already in the area of the Somme, had relieved a battalion of the Border Regiment in the trenches - in the firing-line by day, as support by night.



(Right: *A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel* – photograph from 2007(?))

He was to report to duty with the Newfoundland Battalion on that May 19, 1916, whereupon he was immediately attached to ‘D’ Company.

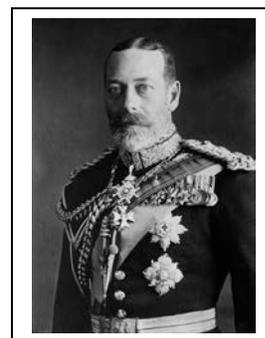
\* \* \* \* \*

At the beginning of August of 1915, more than nine months prior - and as previously seen - the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, had been sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot.

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Meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived 'E' – that of Captain Ayre - and then 'F'\* , had been ordered stationed to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion\*.

(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* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)



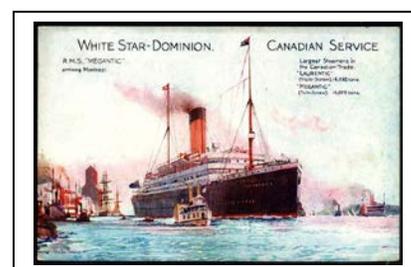
*\*On July 10, 1915, 'F' Company had arrived at Stobs Camp from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service.*

Having completed its time at Aldershot, the by-now 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment - comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', and already attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force – had been ordered onto *active service*.



(Right above: *Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915* – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)

On August 20 of 1915, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks where, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on the night of September 19-20, the Newfoundland force was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*



(Right above: *The image of Megantic, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

(Right: *Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is to be seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a landing-craft are still clearly visible in the foreground on 'A' Beach.* – photograph taken in 2011)



(continued)

**(Right: Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: either *Megantic* on August 29, *Ausonia* on September 18, or *Prince Abbas* on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives)**



**(Right below: A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)**



**Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, would prove to be little more than a debacle:**

**Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and of course the casualties inflicted by an enemy who was to fight a great deal better than the British High Command\* had ever anticipated – were eventually to overwhelm the British-led forces and those of the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.**

**(Right below: An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from the Provincial Archives)**

***\*Many of the commanders chosen were second-rate, had been brought out of retirement, and had little idea of how to fight – let alone of how to win. One of the generals at Suvla Bay, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.***



**November 26 had seen the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes during the *Gallipoli Campaign*. A freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm had struck the *Suvla Bay* area on that day and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival from the wrath of nature rather than from that of the enemy was to be the priority.**

**There were to be many casualties in both camps, some of them, surprised by the sudden inundation of their positions, fatalities who had drowned in their trenches – although no Newfoundlanders were to be among that number.**

**Numerous had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite but the end of the *Gallipoli Campaign* had already been in sight. After the storm, the Newfoundlanders were to remain stationed at *Suvla Bay* for only a further twenty-five days.**

**By that time they were to have served there for exactly three months to the day.**

**(continued)**

On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.

Some of the Battalion personnel had been evacuated to the nearby island of *Imbros*, some to *Lemnos*, further away, but in neither case was the respite to be of a long duration; the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *Cape Helles as seen from the Turkish positions on the misnamed Achi Baba, positions which were never breached. The Newfoundland positions were to the right-hand side of the picture. – photograph from 2011*)

The British and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

This operation would take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the rear-guard on this second occasion also.



(Right: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation in January of 1916 – from Illustration*)

*\*Lieutenant Owen Steele of St. John's, Newfoundland, is cited as having been the last soldier of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to step into the final small boat to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.*



(Right: *The same 'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

When the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of *Alexandria*, to arrive there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month.

The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to *Suez*, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division had yet to be decided\*.

*\*Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.*

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(Right: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment were among the last to leave on two occasions, at both Suvla Bay and Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis from Illustration*)



After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had boarded His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq on March 14 to sail up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles, on March 22.



(Right above: *Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles. – from a vintage post-card*)

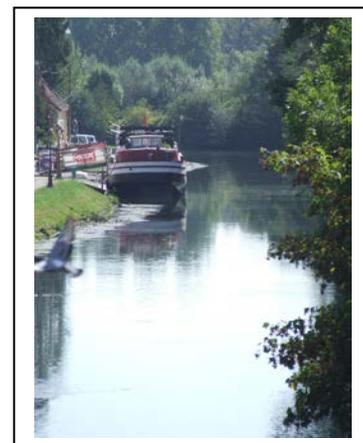


Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train had found its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having travelled unused in a separate wagon.

Having de-trained at the local station at two o'clock in the morning, the Newfoundlanders were now still to endure the long, dark march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

It is doubtful if many of those tired soldiers were to pay much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they had then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to become a part of their history.

(Right: *A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)



On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

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Just days following the Newfoundland Battalion's arrival on the *Western Front*, two of the four Companies – 'A', and 'B' – were to take over several support positions from a British unit\* before the entire Newfoundland unit was to then be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.



(Right: A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))

*\*It should be mentioned that the Newfoundland Battalion and two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles who were serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment Battalion, were the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles at that time - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.*

On May 3 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had completed its first tour in the forward positions and had retired to the rear, at first to Mailly-Maillet and then to the vicinity of Lovencourt. The unit had remained there until May 18, two weeks later, and the day before Captain Ayre was to report *to duty*.

Whether he was immediately ordered forward into the trenches with his new company has not been recorded by the Battalion's War Diarist but, if so, he would not have enjoyed his introduction to the sharp end of the stick: both the rain and the enemy shelling were to be heavy for the next few days.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Newfoundlanders were re-enforcing and re-organizing at Louvencourt – this at time interspersed with such things as training and route marches. They and some two-hundred other battalions were preparing for the opening day of the upcoming British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for the meandering river flowing through the region: *the Somme*.



(Right above: *Beaumont-Hamel: Looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which today stands atop part of the German front-line defences: The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009*)

If there is one name and date in Newfoundland history which is etched in the collective once-national memory, it is that of Beaumont-Hamel on July 1 of 1916; and if any numbers are remembered, they are those of the eight-hundred who went *over the top* in the third wave of the attack on that morning, and of the sixty-eight unwounded present at muster some twenty-four hours later\*.



(continued)

(Preceding page: A view of Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel– photograph from 2009(?))

*\*Perhaps ironically, the majority of the Battalion's casualties was to be incurred during the advance from the third line of British trenches to the first line from where the attack proper was to be made, and while struggling through British wire laid to protect the British positions from any German attack.*

There are other numbers of course: the fifty-seven thousand British casualties incurred in four hours on that same morning of which nineteen-thousand were recorded as having been *killed in action or died of wounds*.

It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the butchery of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.



(Right above: *Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village.* – photographs from 2010 and 2015)

*In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was a commune – it still exists today – at the time comprising two communities: Beaumont, a village on the German side of the lines, and Hamel which was behind those of the British. No-Man's-Land, on which the Newfoundland Memorial Park lies partially today, was on land that separated Beaumont from Hamel.*



(Right: *A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland - dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel – from...?*)

The son of Frederick Wayne Robert Chesley Ayre, managing director of *Ayre & Sons Ltd.*, and of Lydia Gertrude Ayre (née *Pitts*)\* of *Northview*, Circular Road, St. John's, he was also husband of Janet Ayre (née *Miller*) of St. John's. Captain Ayre's own addresses are recorded as *Brookdale*, Circular Road, St. John's as well as *Rodney House*, Endford Square, in West-Central London (apparently with other properties in the United Kingdom and Ireland).

*\*The couple was married on May 25, 1885.*

He was reported as having been *killed in action* at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'D' Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*\*.

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**\*From London: *Informant states that he saw Capt. Ayre killed by machine gun fire July 1<sup>st</sup> in No Man's Land.* – Reference...Shea, Edmund, 874; 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Regiment; St. Thomas's Hospital (in the London Borough of Lambeth).**

**Captain Eric Stanley Ayre died at twenty-seven years of age: month and year of birth, October, 1888 (from Methodist Parish Records).**

**His brother, Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre, serving with the Norfolk Regiment, was to die on the same day – although not at Beaumont-Hamel. Two cousins, Second Lieutenants Gerald Walter Ayre and Wilfrid Douglas Ayre also fell on that July 1 with the others of the Newfoundland Battalion.**

***(The photograph of Lieutenant(?) Ayre is from the Provincial Archives.)***



**At some time in January or early February of 1920, the remains of Captain Ayre were removed from the place of their original burial...at a Point, South, South, West of Beaumont Hamel, Somme, France, Sheet 57d Q. 10d 85.20...and transferred to where they repose today.**

**Captain Eric Stanley Ayre was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).**



***The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mrs. Rosemary Ayre and of Mrs. Kathleen Knowling in correcting some of the errors which were to be found in the original biographies.***