

No photograph available – as yet!

Private Matthias Ball (Regimental Number 2814) lies buried in Exploits Methodist Cemetery on abandoned Exploits Island.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman earning an annual \$300.00, Matthias Ball was a recruit of the Tenth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on May 29, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on the same May 29, before attesting on the following day, May 30.

It was the 28th of August when Private Ball embarked for passage to the United Kingdom and it was on board His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian** (right) that he was to make the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom.

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This was the third such voyage that the ship was to make in 1916, the Newfoundlanders likely sharing the vessel with Canadian personnel**. Private Ball was a soldier of Section 8, Platoon 10, 'C' (Reserve) Company of 3rd Battalion (see *** below), and one of a draft of two-hundred forty-two personnel from Newfoundland in all.

**Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War.*

***Sicilian had been re-fitted in 1906 to carry just under twelve-hundred passengers, thus her journey to St. John's in March of 1916 was likely followed by the short passage to Halifax to embark Canadian military personnel. Likewise, in July, she had sailed from Montreal on July 16 with Canadians to embark the Newfoundlanders awaiting passage overseas.*

****3rd Battalion was based in St. John's, whereas 2nd (Reserve) Battalion – 'E', 'F', 'G' and 'H' Companies - was stationed in the United Kingdom. 1st Battalion was the edge of the sword – 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies – and was posted to the front.*

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, the ship docked in the south-coast naval port of Devonport from where the Newfoundlanders entrained for the journey north to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot where each newcomer was delegated to one of the four resident companies - and the where the somewhat confusing title of 'C' Company was abandoned.

The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, there to serve as a base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion. It was from there – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers arriving from home were despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *an aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

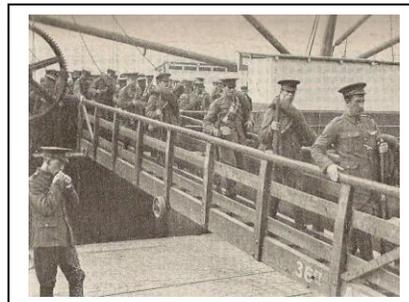
During the winter of 1915-1916 the men of the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion had been lodged in several venues, at a nearby military camp at Gales, but also as far afield as Paisley Barracks, some sixty-five kilometres distant. However, by the spring of 1916 the difficulty had been overcome by housing the men in a requisitioned school, in a tented community and in the Ayr Racecourse Grandstand, all in the district of Newton-upon-Ayr.



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(Right above: *the new race-course at Ayr - opened in 1907 – where the men of the Regiment were sometimes billeted and where they replaced some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photo from 2012*)

The 14th Re-enforcement Draft – Private Ball among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on November 30 of 1916 on its way to the Continent and to the Western Front. It disembarked in the Norman capital of Rouen on the next day, December 1, and spent time at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot located there, in final training and organization*, before making its way to a rendezvous with 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

**Apparently, the standard length of time for this final training at the outset of the war had been ten days – although this was to become more and more flexible as the War progressed - in areas near Rouen, Étaples, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

When that rendezvous was effected it was late in the day of December 11 – which is likely why it is recorded in the Regimental War Diary as occurring on the 12th. The parent unit had retired from the front on December 8, but many of the men had been seconded for work at Carnoy and Fricourt.

Those spared had marched on to Méricourt l'Abbé which is where the one-hundred seventy-three *other ranks* from Base Depot – Private Ball among that number - reported *to duty*. The newcomers were just in time for the six-week Christmas period to be spent well behind the lines in *Corps Reserve*, encamped near the city of Amiens.



(Right: *a typical British Army Camp during a winter period somewhere in France – from a vintage post-card*)

After that Christmas respite, 1st Battalion *officially* returned to *active service* on January 23 of the New Year, 1917, although they had already been back in the trenches for several days and had suffered their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917. The next five weeks were no different: in and out of the trenches, the occasional dead, wounded and ill, and the occasional cold winter's day with its snow and ice - which did not seem to bother the Newfoundlanders. Anything was better than rain and mud.

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The only infantry activity involving 1st Battalion during that entire period – from the action in mid-October of 1916 at Gueudecourt, until Monchy-le-Preux in April of 1917 – was to be the sharp engagement at Sailly-Saillisel at the end of February and the beginning of March, an action which brought this episode in the Newfoundlanders’ War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.



(Above right: *The fighting during the time of the Battalion’s posting to Sailly-Saillisel took place on the far side of the village which was no more than a heap of rubble at the time. - photograph from 2009(?)*)

After the infantry affair at Sailly-Saillisel, the month of March was a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they now spent their time near the communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and training for upcoming events. They even had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris (right), the latter on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day.



On March 29, 1st Battalion began to make its way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, on to the village of Monchy-le-Preux.



(Right: *the remnants of the Grande Place in the city of Arras early 1916 – from Illustration*)

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties it was the most expensive operation of the War for the British, its only positive episode being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



The French offensive was a disaster.

(Above right: *the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

1st Battalion was to play its part in the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at a place called Monchy-le-Preux on April 14 and which would finish ten days later, on April 23, perhaps a kilometre distant, at *Les Fosses Farm*. After Beaumont-Hamel, Monchy-le-Preux was to prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders’ war, four-hundred eighty-seven casualties on April 14 alone.

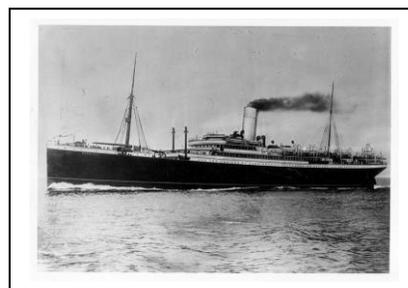


(Preceding page: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen today from the western – in 1917, the British – side of the community. The Newfoundlanders advanced, out of the ruins, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)

Private Ball was at first reported as *missing in action* at Monchy-le-Preux on April 14. However, a subsequent official German list dated 23/6/17 was forwarded through the offices of the *Geneva Red Cross* on July 20, a report which named him as having been captured on that April 14, to become a prisoner-of-war. The German report documented him as being at the camp of twelve thousand men at *Limberg an der Lahn* on June 30, to apparently be later transferred to Freidrichsfeld, where he became one of the thirty-five thousand detainees there.

After the Armistice of November 11, 1918, arrangements were made for prisoners to be repatriated, and Private Ball returned to the United Kingdom via Dover on December 12 of that same year. Three days later he was reporting to 'H' Company at the Regimental Depot at Hazely Down in southern England, to where it had been transferred from Scotland eleven months previously.

A document records Private Ball as having been granted a two-month furlough in London on the day after his arrival at Hazely Down. But this period of leave was apparently abbreviated as he is also recorded as having taken ship back to Newfoundland on board the *SS Corsican* (right) to St. John's on January 31 of the New Year, 1919, arriving there and reporting to the Regimental Depot on February 7*.



*It was noted in a telegram sent to St. John's that Private Ball was one of the soldiers... *requiring special attention upon arrival in Newfoundland.*

Three days after his debarkation in Newfoundland, on February 10, he was admitted into Barracks Hospital, and two days later again, on the 12th, was forwarded to the General Hospital, having by then been diagnosed as suffering from typhoid fever. By March 21 he was being considered as *dangerously ill.*

The son of John Henry Ball, seaman, and Martha Ball (née *Oake*) – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - of Exploits, and brother to at least one unidentified sister, he was reported as having died of his illness at half-past eight on the morning of March 31, 1919. His body, embalmed and coffined by Mr. J.C. Oke, undertaker, left St. John's by train for the journey to Lewisporte on the next day, April 1, thence by boat to Exploits Island.

Matthias Ball had enlisted at the age of twenty years and seven months: date of birth, October 2, 1895.

Private Matthias Ball was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

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**Mr John Ball
Exploits, Newfoundland**

22nd December 1917

Sir,

With reference to your letter of 6/11/17 (7884): No direct communication has been received from 2814, Pte M.Ball, but as he has not been reported sick or wounded it is presumed that he is well. Clothing has been sent to him from me to time as well as other parcels of food regularly each fortnight. Information was received 10/12/17 from the Central Prisoners of War Committee that Pte. Ball's address had been changed to Kriegsgefangenen – Stammlager, Freidrichsfeld, Germany. With reference to your enquiry concerning letters from him, it would appear that at Limburg (which is not a regular camp) he was unable to correspond regularly, but now that he is transferred to Freidrichsfeld, it is likely that he will have better facilities for writing and you will probably be receiving letters from him regularly. Should any information be received regarding him you will be immediately notified. Please note that all communications to this Office should be addressed to the Chief Paymaster & Officer i/c Records and not to individuals.

**I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant
XXXXXX**

(Right: The sacrifice of Private Ball is also honoured on the Screen Wall in the Military Plot Mount Pleasant Cemetery, St. John's. – photograph from 2011)

