

Sergeant Ralph Norman Balsom (Regimental Number 2395) is interred in Passchendaele New British Cemetery – Grave reference XI. A. 14.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a railway conductor working for the *Reid Newfoundland Company* and earning a monthly sixty-five dollars, Ralph Norman Balsom was a recruit of the Ninth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on March 31, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – three days later, on April 3, attesting on that same day.

Just prior to departing Newfoundland for overseas service, Private Balsom received a first promotion: on June 9 he was appointed to the rank of lance corporal.

Lance Corporal Balsom sailed from St. John's on July 19 on board His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian (right). The ship - refitted some ten years previously to carry well over one thousand passengers - had left the Canadian port of Montreal on July 16, carrying Canadian military personnel.**

(continued)



It is likely that the troops disembarked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool; however, it is *certain* that upon disembarkation the contingent journeyed north by train to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot.

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

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 the 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-upon-Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

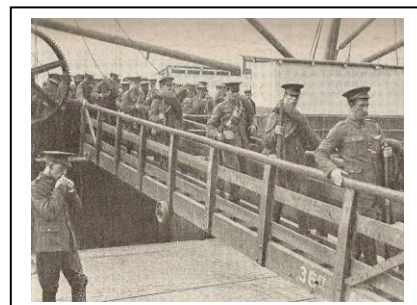
At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to accommodate the new arrivals – plus men from other regiments who were still being billeted in the area – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in Ayr itself, and the other ranks had been billeted at Newton Park School and either in the grandstand or in a tented camp at the racecourse in the suburb of Newton-upon-Ayr.



(Right above: *the new race-course at Newton-upon-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 – photograph from 2012*)

The 11th Re-enforcement Draft – Lance Corporal Balsom one of its non-commissioned officers - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 3 of 1916 on its way to the Continent and to the Western Front.

The contingent disembarked in the Norman capital of Rouen on the next day, October 4, 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: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

(continued)

****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.***

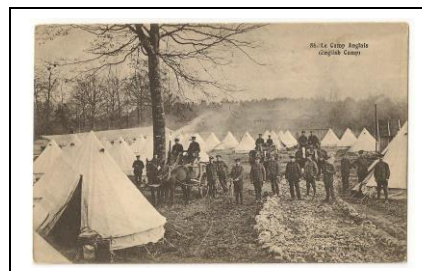
The contingent with which Lance Corporal Balsom reported *for duty in the field* was a large detachment of two-hundred sixty-six *other ranks* which arrived from Rouen at the Battalion transport lines on October 12. This was also the day on which 1st Battalion made its attack on the enemy positions at Gueudecourt, again sustaining heavy casualties – two-hundred thirty-nine all told - and gaining little.

Thus it was that the new-comers remained behind the lines until the 14th, two days later, when they were moved up to *Switch Trench* and parcelled out to the Battalion's four depleted fighting companies. Consequently, the date of their arrival is often recorded not as October 12 but as October 14.

(Right: This is the ground over which 1st Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon. This is also the area of the positions into which the re-enforcements of October 12-14 were posted. – photograph from 2007)



After the episode of October 12 at Gueudecourt, 1st Battalion had remained in the same area of *the Somme* and was regularly into and out of the trenches. There were to be no infantry engagements, but the incessant artillery action ensured a steady stream of casualties. The Newfoundlanders would be withdrawn from active service on or about December 12 and were to spend the following six weeks or so encamped well behind the lines and close to the city of Amiens.



(Right above: a British encampment somewhere on the Continent, apparently during the winter season – from a vintage post-card)

After that welcome six-week Christmas-time respite away from the front lines, the Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion *officially* returned to *active service* on January 23, although they had been back in the trenches already by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

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.



It was during this wintry period that Lance Corporal Balsom received further promotion: on February 9 he put up his second stripe having been elevated to the rank of corporal.

(Preceding page: *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 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 that 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, its march to finish amid the rubble of a village called Monchy-le-Preux.



(Right above: *the remnants of the Grande Place in the city of Arras in 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.



(Right above: *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.



(Above right: *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*)

Perhaps it was because of those heavy casualties that the Newfoundlanders suffered at Monchy-le-Preux that Corporal Balsom found himself promoted on a third occasion just two days afterwards: to the rank of sergeant on April 16.

The Newfoundlanders' final engagement during the *Battle of Arras* took place at Les Fosses Farm, on the main road between Arras and Cambrai. There were numerous casualties of which many, as ever, were the result of artillery fire. On the following day, April 24, 1st Battalion again withdrew towards Arras.



(Right above: *Windmill Cemetery stands about mid-way between Monchy-le-Preux – about three hundred metres behind the photographer – and Les Fosses Farm – three hundred metres to the right along the main road to Arras. – photograph from 2007*)

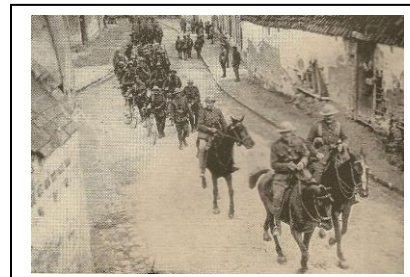
(Right: *Newfoundland troops just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux – from *The War Illustrated**)

In contrast to the hard fighting at Monchy-le-Preux in April, May of 1917 was to be a period when the Newfoundlanders were moved hither and thither on the Arras front, in and out of the trenches. Apart from the ever-present artillery, there was little infantry activity – except for the marching.

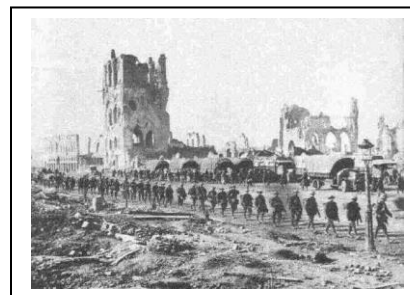


(Right: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville in May of 1917 – from *The War Illustrated**)

At the beginning of June, 1st Battalion retired from the line to Bonneville and spent its time re-enforcing, re-organizing and training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.



The Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion were once again ordered north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again to the area of *the Ypres Salient*. This had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was one of the British Army's objectives.



(Right above: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from *Illustration**)

(continued)

1st Battalion was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army which floundered its way across the sodden countryside of Flanders. Notably it fought in two major engagements, at the *Steenbeek* on August 16, and at the *Broembeek* on October 9. But Sergeant Balsom would play no role in either of those affairs.



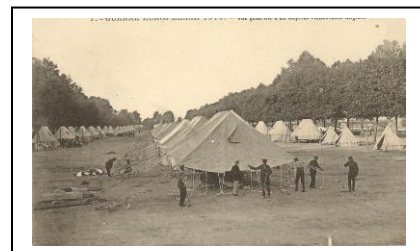
(Right top: *an unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

During the first weeks of July, 1st Battalion was engaged in and near the front line to the north of Ypres, strengthening trenches close to the Yser Canal. There was little, in any, infantry action, but the artillery of both sides was active. Part of the entry in the Regimental War Diary on July 10 reads ...*A & B Coys complete a new support line for HARVEY Trench. Casualties one wounded: it was likely Sergeant Balsom.*



(Right above: *the Yser Canal to the north of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) – In July of 1917 the Newfoundlanders were stationed near to this spot, 'A', 'C' and 'D' Companies in the front line and the immediate reserve on the east bank (to the right in the photograph), with 'B' Company and HQ on the western side. – photograph from 2013*)

With an injury to his right arm inflicted by gun-fire, he was evacuated to the 4th Casualty Clearing Station at Lozinghem* on July 10 before being forwarded to the 24th General Hospital at Étaples on July 12. On July 21 Sergeant Balsom was released to the 6th Convalescent Depot, also at Étaples, where he apparently stayed for ten days until August 31 when he was transferred to the 11th Convalescent Depot at Buchy.



(Right above: *a British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when necessary – being established somewhere on the Continent – from a vintage post-card*)

**Several names such as Mendinghem, Bandaghem and Dozinghem were invented by the British troops as they resembled the Belgian and northern-French fashion of naming villages. These sites were occupied by medical facilities only – and the inevitable cemeteries which today remain. But Lozinghem seems to be an exception in that it is a real place – however much the name lends itself to the morbid spirit of the British soldier.*

On October 20 Sergeant Balsom was discharged to duty at the Base Depot, Rouen, from there re-joining 1st Battalion on the 25th of that same month, apparently being posted to work with the transport train.

(continued)

A week after the encounter of October 9 at the *Broembek*, the Newfoundlanders were withdrawn from the *Passchendaele* campaign in order to prepare for yet another upcoming offensive: *Cambrai*. They were ordered back south from Belgium into northern France on October 17 to re-enforce, to organize and to train in the vicinity of Berles-au-Bois, a small rural community a dozen or so kilometres to the south-west of Arras.

The so-called *Battle of Cambrai* was to officially last for just two weeks and a day, from November 20 until December 4, the Newfoundlanders directly involved at all times during that period.

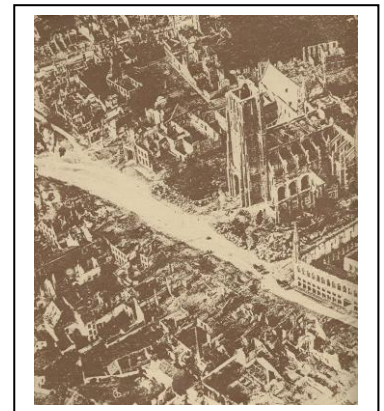
The battle began well for the British who used tanks on a large scale for the first time; but opportunities were squandered and by its close the British had relinquished as much territory as they had gained. 1st Battalion was again dealt with severely, at Marcoing and at Masnières - where a Caribou stands today: of the total of five-hundred fifty-eight officers and men who went into battle, two-hundred forty-eight had become casualties by the end of the second day.



(Above right: *the Canal St-Quentin at Masnières, the crossing of which and the establishment of a bridgehead being the first objectives for the Newfoundlanders on November 20, the first day of the Battle of Cambrai – photograph from 2009*)

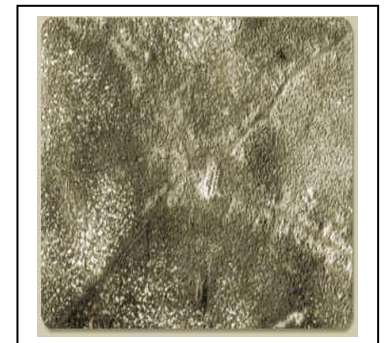
Whether Sergeant Balsom played much of a role, if any at all at Masnières, is not clear, for he was reported as being in the 103rd Field Ambulance on November 22, suffering from tonsillitis. However, there is only one such report – no other documentation supports it – so it may not be correct.

In January the Newfoundlanders were despatched to be stationed in *the Ypres Salient* for a third time. They, like the other British and Empire troops, spent much of their time building and strengthening defences. In the meantime, the Germans had been preparing for a final effort to win the War: the Allies were exhausted and lacking man-power after their exertions of 1917 - the British had fought three campaigns and some units of the French Army had mutinied - and the Germans had available the extra divisions that their victory over the Russians in the East now allowed them. It was expected that they would launch a spring offensive.



(Right above: *an aerial photograph of Ypres taken towards the end of 1916 – from Illustration*)

(Right: *the village and surrounding area of Passchendaele as seen from the air in late 1917 – from Illustration*)



(continued)

January 29 was the fourth of a five-day tour that the Newfoundlanders had been spending in the front line near Passchendaele. There had been little belligerent activity; even the enemy artillery had been relatively quiet. The previous two days had been spent wiring the area. The Regimental War Diarist saw fit to make just a single entry: ...*Casualties 1 other Rank killed.*



(Right above: *countryside in-between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele (today Passendale) in the vicinity of where the Newfoundlanders were stationed in late January of 1918 – photograph from 2011)*

The son of William Balsom (former fisherman, deceased March 31 of 1917) and Sarah Lilly Balsom – to whom he had allocated a daily allowance of sixty cents from his pay - of Clarenville – he was the oldest child of nine, the others being: George; Merida; Alfred; Roy (Private R. L. Balsom, Regimental Number 2770, who survived the War); Ephraim; Florence; Roland; and Beatrice.

Sergeant Balsom – who, on January 12, had been recommended for officer training - was reported as having been *killed in action* while serving with ‘B’ Company on January 29, 1918.

George Norman Balsom had enlisted at the age of twenty-three years: date of birth, March 18, 1893, according to the 1911 census.



(Right above: *The Clarenville War Memorial honours the sacrifice of Sergeant Balsom. – photograph from 2009)*

Sergeant George Norman Balsom was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

