



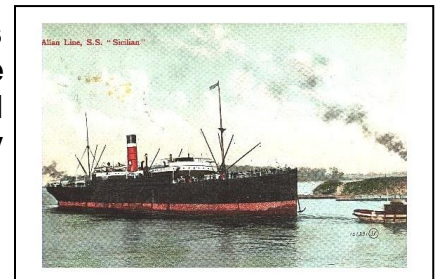
Private Herbert Belbin (Regimental Number 2486) lies in Cologne Southern Cemetery – Grave reference XVI. B. 49.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a mill-man, Herbert Belbin was a recruit of the Ninth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on April 10, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on the following day, April 11, before attesting on the morrow again, April 12.

**A second document records him attesting on the day of his enlistment.*

Private Belbin 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.

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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.

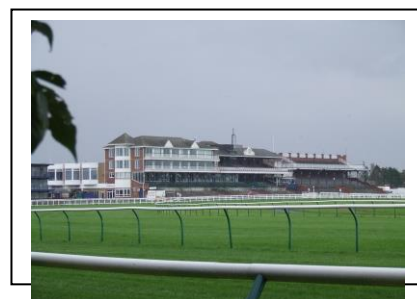
**Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport during another conflict, carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War.*

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.

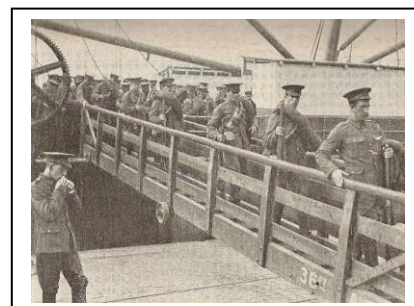


(Right above: *the new race-course at Newton-upon-Ayr - opened in 1907 – where the men of the Regiment were sometimes billeted and where they replaced some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photograph from 2012*)

The 12th Re-enforcement Draft – Private Belbin among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 11 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 12, 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*)



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**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.*

Private Belbin's contingent comprised a single officer and two-hundred twenty-six *other ranks* by the time it reported to *duty* at the Bernafay Wood Camp on October 22. Still in the area of Gueudecourt, 1st Battalion had been relieved in the front line three days before, on the 19th.

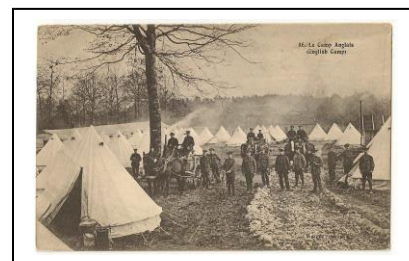


(Right: *Bernafay Wood a century later – not being close to the front lines, the wood may well have resembled what is seen here – photograph from 2014*)

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 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: *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.



(Right above: *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(?)*)

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After the efforts at Sailly-Saillisel, the month of March was to be a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they 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.



It was 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 adjacent: *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*)

The son of William Belbin (fisherman) and Julia Belbin – to whom he had allocated a daily allowance of fifty-five cents from his pay - of Country Road, Bay Roberts in the District of Harbour Grace, he was also brother to William, Robert, Louisa and Helen.

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Private Belbin was at first reported as *missing in action* while serving with 'D' Company on April 14, 1917, in the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux. But then a German report of April 21, 1917, passed to London via the offices of the *Geneva Red Cross*, subsequently listed him as having been wounded in the left arm, taken as a prisoner-of-war, and hospitalized in Munster, before being sent to a camp.

(Right below: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands atop the remains of a German stronghold in the centre of the re-constructed village.* – photograph from 2009(?))

During the Great War it was not unusual for prisoners to accept offers of work – with the possibility of better conditions - outside their camps. Apparently Private Belbin, after his release from hospital to a POW camp, accepted a job in a quarry. There were several reports issued of the accident resulting in his death, but the one from the Prussian Ministry of War, issued on or about September 20, 1919, is the most comprehensive:



Private Herbert Belbin, Newfoundland Regiment, D Company, born on 12/3/1895. at Bay Roberts, Newfoundland, received fatal injuries at a working camp on 8/6/18.

Belbin was working as breakman (sic) on a train loaded with chalk. For unknown reasons he jumped off the wagon while the train was proceeding (sic) quite slowly, and fell down, sustaining injuries to his skull, from which he died. The Ministry of War requests this fact may be brought to knowledge of British Government.

It may be added that an eye witness says he jumped off the train in order to change the points (*switches*) and slipped.

It may also be added that at least two reports have him dying in the Camp Kupper's hospital five days later, on June 13 at half-past five in the afternoon.

Private Belbin was buried by the Germans in Dusseldorf Cemetery with full military honours. His remains were later – in or about January, 1924 - exhumed and transferred to where they repose today.



Herbert Belbin had enlisted at the age of nineteen years and one month.

(Right above: *The sacrifice of Private Belbin is honoured on the War Memorial in Bay Roberts.* – photograph from 2010)

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

