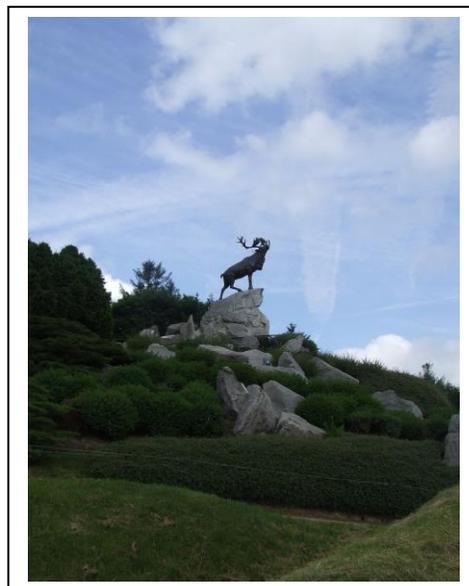


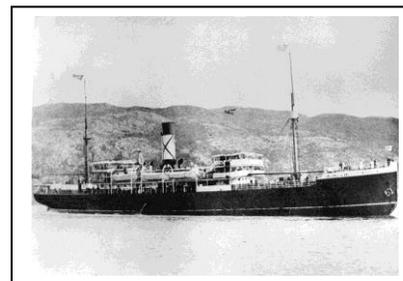


Private Wilson Benson (Regimental Number 3357), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated beneath the Caribou in Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a longshoreman earning a weekly \$9.60, Wilson Benson was a recruit of the Twelfth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on December 22 of 1916, he then enlisted – *for the duration of the war* and at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 per diem – and also attested on that same December 22.



Private Benson was one of the approximately three hundred twenty *all ranks* to leave St. John's for *overseas service* on the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* (right), bound for Halifax, on January 31, 1917, from there to take ship to the United Kingdom.



Immediately upon its arrival in Nova Scotia, however, this detachment was forwarded to accommodation in the town of Windsor where it was soon to be quarantined because of an epidemic of measles and mumps.

It was not before a lapse of some two-and-a-half months after its arrival that transport could be arranged for the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom for the so-called *Windsor Draft* – minus the twenty-five or so personnel still unable to travel.

On April 17, Private Benson embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Ausonia* (right), one of three ships carrying the Newfoundlanders to sail on the next day in a convoy from Halifax. The vessels were also carrying Canadian reinforcements to the English west-coast port of Liverpool, where the ships docked on April 29.



Arriving in England the contingent entrained for the west coast of Scotland. By this time, the Regimental Depot at Ayr had already been in existence to serve as the base for the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment for two years. It was from here – since November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers from Newfoundland were to be despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.



By the time that the Windsor Draft arrived at the Regimental Depot, 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion was becoming critically short of personnel.

(Previous page: *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*)

On June 11, 1917, the 25<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Benson among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on its way to France. On the following day, June 12, the contingent disembarked in the Norman capital, Rouen, where time was spent at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot, to be organized and to undergo final training\* before moving onward to its eventual rendezvous with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

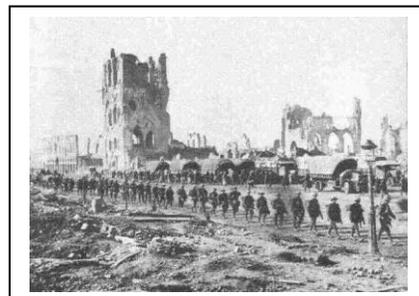


(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

*\*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.*

The records show that it was on July 2 – the *Regimental War Diary* says, in fact, on the day before - that Private Benson's contingent of two-hundred fifty *other ranks* reported to duty at Caribou Camp, behind the lines near Woesten in Belgium. For the next few days – and nights – 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion supplied working parties for road-mending and for the construction of infantry tracks. For that purpose, several of the Newfoundlanders were attached temporarily until July 20 to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Company of the Royal Engineers.

Only days before, at the end of June, the Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had once again moved north into Belgium and once again to the area of Ypres. 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*)

Only eight days after the arrival of Private Benson at the front, on July 10, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was in positions on the east bank of the Yser Canal to the north of Ypres, the Regimental War Diarist making note of just a single casualty, wounded.

(continued)



(Previous page: a *British casualty clearing station* – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card)

*\*Several names such as Mendinghem, Bandagehem 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.*



(Right above: *transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power* – from a vintage post-card)

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 – some personnel even having been granted at the time a ten-day furlough back to the United Kingdom. It was at *Berles-au-Bois* that Private Benson reported back to duty on October 25.

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. 1<sup>st</sup> 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)

The son of Newman Benson, labourer, and Sarah Benson (*née Keats*) – to whom he had allocated a daily sixty cents from his pay - of 41, the South Side in St. John's, he was also brother to Lindsey, to John, to Amelia and to George.

Private Benson was at first reported as *missing in action* on December 3, 1917, during the fighting near the villages of *Marcoing* and *Masnières*.

(continued)

However, in an official German document forwarded through the offices of the Geneva Red Cross and dated March 14, 1918, Private Benson was reported as having been buried by the enemy in Seranvilles cemetery. His own records were thus amended so as to read *killed in action or died of wounds on 3/12 or shortly thereafter*.



Wilson Benson had enlisted at the age of eighteen years and three months.

(Right above: *The Caribou at Masnières stands on the high ground to the north of the community. The seizure of this terrain was the final objective of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on November 20; however, whether this was ever achieved is at best controversial.* – photograph from 2012)

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



Major Timewell

41 South Side  
St. Johns  
Newfoundland  
March/ 20<sup>th</sup> 1918

Dear Sir I am writing to ask you if you can give me any information concerning my Son 3357: pervit Wilson Benson Beloning to the Royal Nfld Regiment I have Reicevid a message to the affect that he was posed as missing on Dec 3: 1917 and Scince that time I haven't Recivid aney orther informintion concerning his whereabouts I am his moter anyiouslyley wating for some news concerning him willyou pleas do your Best to try and Locate him for me Remining Dear Sir

moter anysily witing  
Mrs Sarah Benson