



Private Leo Michael Burke (Regimental Number 1170) is...*believed to be buried*...in Ancre British Cemetery – Grave reference: Special Memorial 30.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *labourer* earning a weekly five dollars, Leo Michael Burke presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on February 19, 1915. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

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It was to be only a single following his medical assessment, on February 20, before he returned to the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road to enlist – engaged at the private soldier’s rate of a single dollar per diem plus a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance*.

Then, whereas attestation for other recruits had come about several long weeks after enlistment, he was now to swear his *Oath of Allegiance*, the *final* formality, only nine days later again, on March 1. At that moment, Leo Michael Burke thereupon became...*a soldier of the King*.

There now passed a lengthy period of seven weeks plus three days - there appear to be no details of how or where he may have spent this time - before, on April 22, 1915, Private Burke, Number 1170, embarked in the harbour of St. John’s for...*overseas service*...with the two-hundred forty-nine officers and...*other ranks*...of ‘E’ Company onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax.

Two days later, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening, the detachment began its trans-Atlantic passage on board the trans-Atlantic liner *SS Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool, to arrive in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded although the second may well have been the date of disembarkation.



The Newfoundlanders on this occasion had sailed from Halifax in the company of the Canadian Army Service Corps *Railway Supply Depot*.

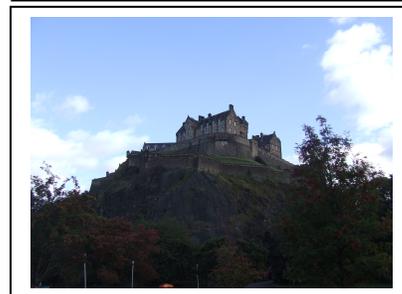
(Right above: *The image of ‘Stephano’ passing through the Narrows of St. John’s Harbour is shown by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right: *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 as part of 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*)

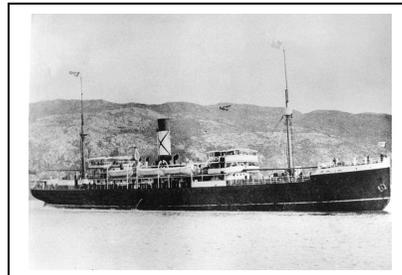


Private Burke’s ‘E’ Company, however, was to have but a few days to savour the charms of the Scottish capital.

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Some seven months before that May 4, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's for the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits – these to become 'A' and 'B' Companies - during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after a recruit's enlistment and/ or attestation. To become known to history as the *First Five Hundred* and also as the *Blue Puttees*, on that day they had boarded the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting in St. John's Harbour.



(Right above: *The image of Florizel at anchor in the harbour at St. John's is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.*)

The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.



(Right: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)

Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom this first Newfoundland contingent was to train in three venues during the late autumn of 1914 and then the winter of 1914-1915: firstly in southern England on the *Salisbury Plain*; then in Scotland at *Fort George* – on the *Moray Firth* close to Inverness; and lastly at *Edinburgh Castle* – where, as recorded beforehand, it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 of 1915, 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent* - would arrive directly – through Liverpool of course - from Newfoundland. On the final day of the month of March it had been the turn of 'D' Company to arrive – they via Halifax as well as Liverpool – to report...*to duty...*at Edinburgh.

**This contingent, while a part of the Newfoundland Regiment, was not yet a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.*

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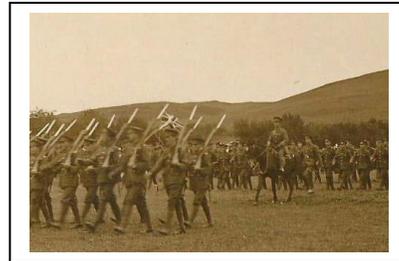
Seven days after Private Burke's 'E' Company's arrival in the Scottish capital, on May 11 the entire Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the unit was dispatched to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.

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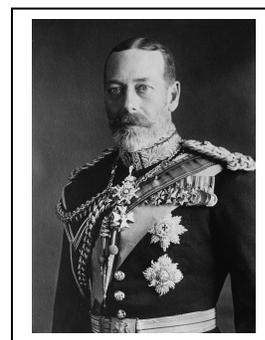
It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent would eventually receive the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. On that date the now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus rendered available to be sent on ...*active service*.

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



**This was approximately fifteen hundred, sufficient to furnish two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot. This force, now the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



(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 – the photograph is from Bain News Services via the Wikipedia web-site.*)

Meanwhile the two junior Companies, ‘E’ – as seen, the last arrived at Edinburgh - and the aforementioned ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

The Regimental Depot was to be Private Burke’s home for the next eight months.

At the end of this summer of 1915, the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland’s west coast was in the throes of becoming the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment from where – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts from home were to be despatched to bolster the 1st Battalion’s numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely 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*)



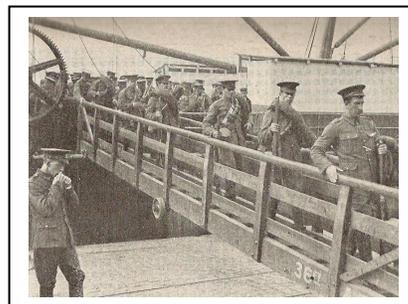
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(Preceding page: *The High Street in Ayr as shown on a postcard of the time, the imposing Wallace Tower – it stands to this day (2017) - dominating the scene – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo.*

It was during this period spent in Scotland that Private Burke, in the Orderly Room at Ayr, having already seen the first four re-enforcement drafts leave for service with the 1st Battalion, enlisted once again on April 8 of 1916, on this second occasion to be engaged *...for the duration of the war**.

**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their enlistment.*

Private Burke was a ranker of the 5th Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr which passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on April 13 of 1916, en route to the *Western Front*. On the following day, the 14th, the contingent landed in Rouen, capital city of Normandy and the site of the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot on the Continent. The Newfoundlanders thereupon proceeded to the nearby Base Depot for several days of final training and organization*.



(Right above: *British troops disembark at an earlier time during the War at Rouen en route 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.*

Second Lieutenant Wilfred Ayre and the thirty-two *other ranks* in his charge reported *to duty* in the village of Mailly-Maillet, not far-removed from the forward area of...*the Front*, on May 4 according to Private Burke's papers – on May 5 according to the Regimental War Diarist. Just behind the front at the time, the village was where the parent 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was being billeted after a posting in the nearby trenches.

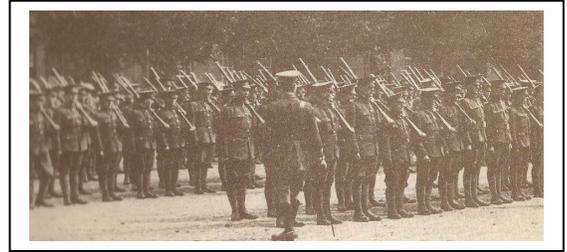


(Right above: *The re-constructed village of Mailly-Maillet – twinned with Torbay, St. John's East – and the 'monument aux morts' to its own war dead – photograph from 2007(?)*)

Only three weeks prior to this, on April 13, the Newfoundland Battalion had *itself* marched into the not-distant village of Englebelmer – thus completing a month-long transfer from Egypt to the *Western Front* – where it was billeted, welcomed re-enforcements, and had almost immediately been put to work in the communication trenches not so very far away.

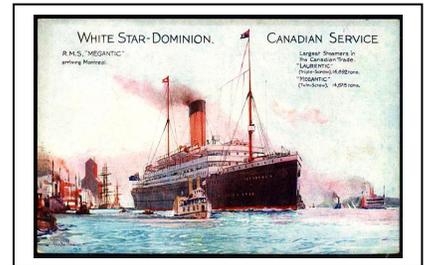
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(Right: *Some of the one-thousand personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Camp Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to the unit's departure to 'active service' on the Gallipoli Peninsula – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)*



(Right: *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.)*

On August 20, 1915, while Private Burke was settling into the routines of service at the Regimental Depot at Ayr, the 1st Battalion 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. There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right: *Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the 1st 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)*



(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 Bay, and where the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to serve during the autumn of 1915 – photograph from 2011)*



When the Newfoundlanders had landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* on that September night of 1915 they were to disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

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Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even ever since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, had been proving 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 their allies, the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.



(Right above: *No-Man's-Land* at *Suvla Bay* as seen from the *Newfoundland* positions – from *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, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.*



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

(Right: *This is Anzac Bay in the fore-ground with the Salt Lake in the centre further away. The bottom of Suvla Bay is just to be seen on the left and adjacent to the Salt Lake, and further away again. The hills in the distance and the ones from which this photograph was taken were held by the Turks and formed a horse-shoe around the plain surrounding the Salt Lake - which was where the British and Newfoundlanders were stationed. – photograph from 2011*)



November 26 of 1915 had seen perhaps the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes at Gallipoli; there was to be a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm strike the *Suvla Bay* area and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival rather than the enemy was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties on both sides, 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, however, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

By this time the situation there was daily becoming more and more untenable, thus on the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the entire 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 had the respite been of a long duration; the 1st Battalion was to be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

(Right: 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, Indian and Anzac forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at Gallipoli – had now only been marking time until a complete withdrawal of the Peninsula could be undertaken.

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



(Right: 'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – 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: '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)

Immediately after the British evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula, the Newfoundland unit had been ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria. On January 14, the Australian Expeditionary Force Transport Nestor had arrived there with the 1st Battalion on board.

The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16th, on its way southwards down the Suez Canal to Port Suez where she arrived on the morrow and where the Newfoundlanders landed and marched to their encampment.



Once at Suez, the Newfoundlanders were now to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.

(Right above: The image of the Blue Funnel Line vessel Nestor is from the Shipspotting.com web-site. The vessel was launched and fitted in 1912-1913 and was to serve much of her commercial life until 1950 plying the routes between Britain and Australia. During the Great War she served mainly in the transport of Australian troops and was requisitioned once again in 1940 for government service in the Second World War. In 1950 she was broken up.)

****Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was already becoming a theatre of war.***

(Right: The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1st 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)



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

After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1st Battalion were to board His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage back up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseille, on March 22.



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

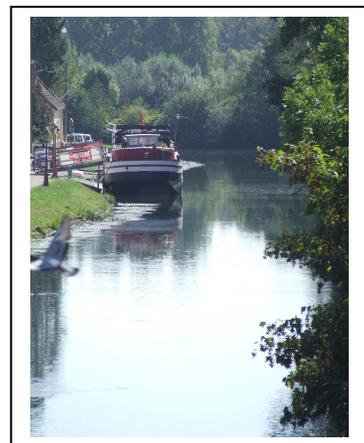
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably 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 had marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to have 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 1st Battalion had subsequently marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where it would be billeted, would receive re-enforcements 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 were then to be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.

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

(Right: A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?))



Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Mailly-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing for the upcoming British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, that flowed – and still does so today – through the region.



And, as related in an earlier paragraph, it was during this period – on May 4 or 5 - that Private Burke, as a soldier of the 5th Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr, had marched into Mailly-Maillet to report...*to duty*...with the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment.

(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)

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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*.



(Right above: 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.

(Preceding page: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

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 greatest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage of *the Somme* was to continue for the following four and a half months.

(Right: *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 Martin Burke and Annie Burke (née Kelly), he was brother to Annie, Mrs. Charles Davis – to whom he allotted a daily allowance of fifty cents from his pay – of 8, Barron Street in St. John's – which he recorded as his own address - and also to Mrs. Joseph Cook of 116, Casey Street*.



**These two ladies are surely the Ann and the Ellen-Mary included among the following list of his siblings: John-Michael (born 1883), Martin (1885), Ann (1888), Ellen-Mary (1890), Patrick (1892), Martin-Joseph (1894) and Mary (born 1898, later Mrs. James Rivet of New Brunswick).*

Private Burke was at first reported as...*missing in action...*at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'B' Company of the Newfoundland Battalion during the fighting of the first day of...*First Somme*.

However, a letter subsequently submitted on September 29 of that year by the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, cited the identification of Private Burke's remains and their burial a week earlier, on or about September 22.

The record of Private Burke was thus amended so as to read *killed in action*.

Leo Michael Burke had enlisted at a *declared* nineteen years of age – the date of his birth, however, remains difficult to ascertain.

Private Leo Michael Burke was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 30, 2023.

