



Lance Corporal George A. Bursey – *Bussey* on his personal file - (Regimental Number 2677), 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 fisherman earning an annual \$400.00, George Bussey was a recruit of the Ninth Draft. Having presented himself at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's for medical examination on May 1, 1916, he also enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of \$1.10 – on that same May 1, before attesting on the following day, May 2.

Private Bursey 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.

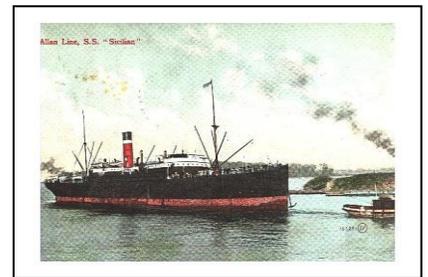
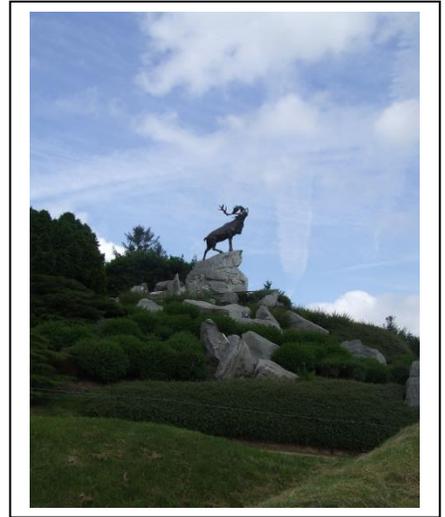
It is likely that the troops disembarked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool; however, it is *certain* that upon disembarkation the contingent journeyed north by train to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot.

*\*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 2<sup>nd</sup> (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 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

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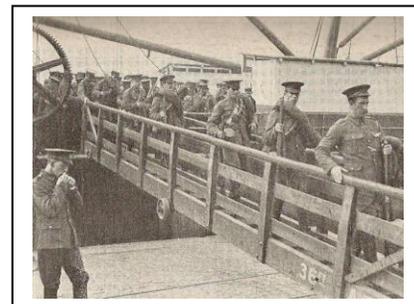


At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to accommodate the new arrivals – plus men from other regiments who were still being billeted in the area – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in Ayr itself, and the other ranks had been 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 13<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Bursey one of the contingent of just ten *other ranks* - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 24 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, October 25, 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 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.*

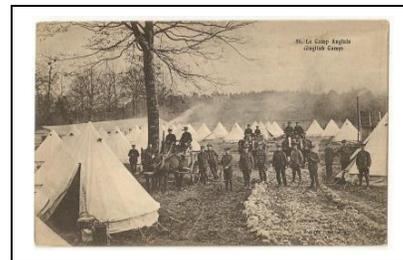
Private Bursey's detachment from Rouen reported *to duty* on November 7 while 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was behind the lines, re-enforcing and re-organizing after its recent efforts at Gueudecourt where once again the Newfoundlanders had incurred heavy losses. Twenty-four *other ranks* and eight officers comprised this particular contingent, one of several such detachments to arrive at Ville-sous-Corbie within the space of a week. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion not to start to move again towards the front lines until November 15.

During the remainder of that autumn of 1916, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to remain in the same area of *the Somme* and was regularly ordered 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.

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(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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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, 1<sup>st</sup> 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 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.

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

1<sup>st</sup> 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.



(Right above: *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 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, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was withdrawn from the *Battle* and marched again 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 ordered 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.

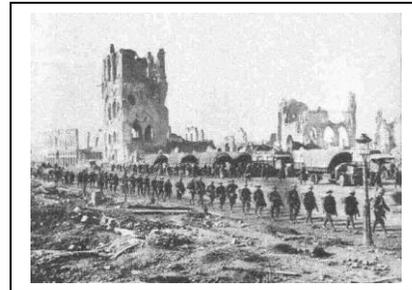
(Right: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville in early May of 1917 – from The War Illustrated*)



At the beginning of June, 1<sup>st</sup> 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.

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The Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

Private Bursey, however, was to see very little, if any, on this first occasion, of the grim story of *Passchendaele* – although it would come later. By July 10 the Newfoundlanders had been in the line for barely four days, although they had suffered a number of casualties.

On that date he was admitted into the 88<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, diagnosed as with an alveolar abscess, and forwarded to the 18<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Dannes-Camiers. His treatment was apparently successful: Private Bursey was discharged to duty at Base Depot, Rouen, on July 23, and was back with his unit on August 28.



(Right above: *the railway station at Dannes-Camiers through which many thousands of sick, wounded and convalescent military personnel passed during the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Private Bursey was a soldier of one of the two drafts totalling one-hundred sixty-six personnel which arrived at Penton Camp, on the outskirts of Poperinghe, on August 28. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had quit the line on the 24<sup>th</sup> and did not return to the front for an entire month. This period, a planned lull in the fighting, was to allow the entire British Army time to reorganize and re-enforce.

*Passchendaele* recommenced for the Newfoundlanders in the front line on September 25, although they had suffered four wounded two days prior to that due to long-range artillery fire. In their trenches they prepared for the next offensive action. It came about two weeks later at the *Broembeek*.

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion remained 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, Private Bursey almost certainly serving at the latter.



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

A week after the encounter of October 9 at the *Broembeek*, 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.

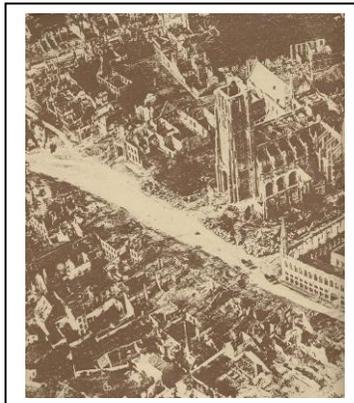
The so-called *Battle of Cambrai* was to officially last for just two weeks and a day, from November 20 until December 4, the Newfoundlanders directly involved at all times during that period.

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. 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.



(Right above: *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*)

At the close of the *Battle of Cambrai*, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion – once again badly under-strength due to the heavy casualties incurred - was withdrawn from the area of the front lines to re-enforce and to re-organize. The following weeks were spent at first to the south-west of the city of Arras, at Humbercourt and then at some distance to the north-west, at Fressin. The weather obliged and allowed the Newfoundlanders some snow, a bit too much at times, apparently.



At the beginning of January of 1918, and after that snowy Christmas period spent to the west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion returned to Belgium, to the Ypres Salient, for a third time.

There, like the other British and Empire troops in the area, they were to spend much of their time building and strengthening defences.

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

While the Allies built their defences, by the beginning of 1918 the Germans were 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 the Germans would launch a spring offensive. While they were waiting, the Newfoundlanders continued to dig.

(Preceding page: *countryside in-between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele (today Passendale) in the vicinity of where the Newfoundlanders were stationed in March and early April of 1918 – photograph from 2011*)

Then the Germans did as was expected of them. Ludendorff's armies had already launched a powerful thrust on March 21, striking at first in the area of *the Somme*, overrunning the battlefields of 1916 and beyond; for a while the advance seemed unstoppable. Then a second offensive, *Georgette*, was launched in the northern sector of the front, in Flanders, where the Newfoundlanders were stationed: the date was April 9. Within two days the situation of the Allies was desperate.



(Right above: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)

On the day after the first heavy bombardments, April 10, as the Germans approached the towns of Armentières and Nieppe, troops were deployed to meet them. The Newfoundlanders, due to come out of the line and move back to the Somme, boarded buses at three o'clock in the afternoon and were suddenly directed southward, towards Nieppe. They were in action, attempting to stem this latest offensive, three hours later.



(Right above: *the area of La Crèche - the buildings in the background - where the Newfoundlanders de-bussed on April 10 to meet the Germans in the area of Steenwerck and its railway station – photograph from 2010.*)

The British were pushed back to the frontier area of France and Belgium. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, fighting in companies rather than as a single entity, was making a series of stands.



On April 13, during the defensive confrontation near the De Seule crossroads on the Franco-Belgian border, one platoon of 'C' Company was obliterated while trying to check the German advance. The remainder of 'C' Company took up defensive positions along a light railway line and, with 'A' Company, stopped a later enemy attack. 'B' and 'D' Companies – in a failed counter-attack on that evening - were equally heavily involved.



(Right above: *ground just to the east of Bailleul where 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion fought during the period April 12 to 21 – photograph from 2013*)

**(Previous page bottom: *These are the De Seule crossroads, lying astride the Franco-Belgian frontier, also the scene of fierce fighting involving 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on April 12 -13, 1918. Today there are several houses and a convenience store. – photograph from 2009(?)*)**

**What exact role Private Bursey played is not known - it seems not even to be recorded in which Company he served - but from April 10 to 21 was to be a difficult – at times critical - eleven days for all of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's personnel. Nevertheless, somehow, the German breakthrough never materialised and the front was finally stabilised.**

**On April 24, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion said farewell to its comrades-in-arms of 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 29<sup>th</sup> Division. It would later be deployed to another unit, but for the summer of 1918 it was to move a world away from Flanders where it had just fought during the crisis of the German spring offensive, to be stationed on the west coast of France. On April 29, the Newfoundlanders took train in Belgium for Étaples, where they arrived at eleven o'clock in the late evening.**

**The summer of 1918 was to pass peaceably enough for most of the personnel of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. For the months of May, June and until early July, the unit had been posted to Écuire, to the Headquarters of Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe.**



**And it was during that posting that Private Bursey was promoted, appointed to the rank of lance corporal. It occurred on June 15.**

**(Right above: *Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force at the time of the Battalion's posting to GHQ. – from Illustration*)**

**The cosmetic honour of this new role, however, masked the reality that 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the recently-proclaimed Royal Newfoundland Regiment was no longer capable of serving in the field\*.**

***\*Although few at home cared to admit it publicly, the problem was that 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had run out of reserves and was unable to continue as a fighting entity. It was to be September before even a battalion of reduced strength could return to active service. At home, mandatory military service was initiated – conscription by another name – but with limited results.***

**The posting to Écuire completed, for most of July and all of August the Newfoundlanders were encamped in much the same area, close to the coastal village of Équihen – itself not far removed from the large Channel port of Boulogne – and far to the rear of the fighting, of which there had been plenty elsewhere.**



**(Right above: *a view of the sparsely-populated coastal community of Équihen at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)**

**(continued)**

The Newfoundlanders returned to the fray on Friday, September 13, as one of the three battalions of 28<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 9<sup>th</sup> Scottish Division.

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was once more to serve on the Belgian front where, some six weeks later, having advanced out of the *Ypres Salient*, it was to finish its war on October 26 at a place called Inghoyghem (today *Ingooigem*).



(Right above: *British troops and German prisoners in Flanders during the Hundred Days – from Illustration*)

On September 28, the Belgian Army and the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Army broke out of their positions, overrunning the enemy lines. It was the start, for them, of the *Hundred Days Offensive*\*. On the following day, the Newfoundlanders were fighting at the Keiberg Ridge. After almost four years of stalemate, it was once again a conflict of movement.

*\*This offensive would prove to be the final campaign of the Western Front and would terminate with the Armistice of November 11. It had begun further to the south on July 18 on the French front on the River Marne, followed on August 8 by an onslaught by British and Empire troops near Amiens in what would also become known as 3<sup>rd</sup> Somme.*

The son of Andrew Bursey, fisherman, and Isabella Bursey (née *Fancey*) – to whom he had allotted a daily fifty cents from his pay - of Victoria Cove, Gander Bay, he was brother to Benjamin (see below), and to Emily-Isobel, to Claude and to Ethel-May – these latter three all dying very young.



Lance Corporal Bursey was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 2, 1918, while fighting in western Belgium - near the village of Ledeghem during the *Hundred Days Offensive*.

George Bursey had enlisted at the age of twenty-one years and five months.

(Right above: *the re-constructed village of Ledeghem, Belgium – photograph from 2009*)

His brother, Private Benjamin Bursey, Regimental Number 1956, had previously *died of wounds* incurred at Gueudecourt on October 14-15 of 1916.

(Right: *The Caribou at Harlebeke – commemorates the crossing of the Lys Canal and honours the sacrifices of the last campaign of the War. – photograph from 2012*)



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Lance Corporal George A. Bursey was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

