

COLLINS, G.W.

Private George William Collins (Regimental Number 2448), 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 clerk, George Collins 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 3, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on April 6, before attesting two days later again, on April 8.



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

Private Collins 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 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-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 12th Re-enforcement Draft – Private Collins 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*)

**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, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

Private Collin's contingent comprised a single officer and two-hundred twenty-six *other ranks* by the time it reported for 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 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.

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On November 19, Private Collins was admitted into the 5th Australian Field Ambulance, diagnosed as suffering with venereal disease, then transferred to an un-identified casualty clearing station. Two days later, November 21, he was a patient in the 2nd General Hospital in Le Havre from where he was forwarded to the 4th Convalescent Depot on the 29th and from there was eventually *discharged to duty* to the Base Depot in Rouen on December 5-6.



Only days later again, he was back with 1st Battalion.

(Right above: *a part of the docks in the French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

When that rendezvous was effected it was late in the day of December 11 – which is why it is recorded elsewhere as happening on the 12th. The parent unit had retired from the front on December 8, but many of the men had been seconded for work at Carnoy and Fricourt. Those spared had marched on to Méricourt l'Abbé which is where the one-hundred seventy-three *other ranks* from Base Depot – Private Collins among that number - reported *to duty*.

The Newfoundlanders were withdrawn from active service on or about that same December 11 or 12 and were to spend the following six weeks or so in *Corps Reserve*, 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 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.



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 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 of the place, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)

The son of James Joseph Collins, employee with *Parker & Monroe*, – to whom he had allocated a daily allotment of sixty cents from his pay - and of Bridget Collins of 16, Balsom Street in St. John's, he was also brother to Margaret, Catherine, Augustine and to Mary-Margaret.

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Private Collins was reported as *missing in action* on April 14, 1917, while serving with 'D' Company during the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux. Some thirty weeks later, on November 17 Private Collins* was officially *presumed dead*.

George William Collins had enlisted at the age of eighteen years and four months.



**He was brother of Private Leo James Collins (Regimental Number 2952) who was later reported as having been 'killed in action' on August 16 of the same year at the Steenbeek during Passchendaele.*

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

(Right: *A family monument which stands in Belvedere Cemetery in St. John's commemorates the sacrifice of two brothers: Private George William Collins and Private Leo James Collins. – photograph from 2015*)



Private George William Collins was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

