

COOPER, W. M.

Private Ward Mellage Cooper (Regimental Number 1945), 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 fireman*, Ward Cooper was a recruit of the Seventh Draft. He enlisted at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on October 22, 1915, before presenting himself for medical examination on the following day, the 23rd. He then attested four days later again, on October 27**.



**As well as being a person who fought fires, a fireman was the person responsible for keeping the boiler working on a steam locomotive or ship.*

***A second source has him attesting on the day of his enlistment.*

Private Cooper was one of the one hundred men who comprised the first contingent of 'H' Company to travel overseas. The draft left St. John's by train for Port aux Basques on December 18, crossing the island and then the Gulf of St. Lawrence en route to Saint John, New Brunswick. The Atlantic voyage was effected from there on His Majesty's Transport *Corinthian* (right) and the draft reached the Regimental Depot at Ayr on January 4 of the New Year, 1916.



Transferred to 'G' Company, the new arrivals were quartered in the barracks of the Royal Scots Fusiliers who had not yet vacated the premises, due to an epidemic of measles at the time. It was not long before the disease had also taken its toll on the Newfoundlanders – one of them to be Private Cooper.

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 a 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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It was while at Ayr that Private Cooper was hospitalized at the Bladda Hospital for Infectious Diseases at Paisley – from March 13, 1916, until April 4 – for medical attention to a case of the measles. It was also during this posting to the Regimental Depot that, on June 30, some eight weeks before his departure to France on *active service*, he was prevailed upon to re-enlist *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.*

The 10th Re-enforcement Draft – Private Cooper among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on August 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, the 25th, and spent time at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot located there, undergoing final training and organization*, before making its way to a rendezvous with 1st 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, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

Private Cooper, however, on this occasion was to go no further than Rouen. Only three days after his arrival in France, on August 29, he was admitted into the 1st Stationary Hospital to be treated for venereal disease*. There he apparently remained until March 9 of the following year when he embarked onto His Majesty’s Hospital Ship *Aberdonian* (right) for the short crossing back to the United Kingdom.



**As late as March 17 of the following year, his family was being apprised that... his case has not yet been diagnosed. Such, perhaps, was the stigma of such a condition.*

Once back in England – having arrived there on March 10 – Private Cooper became a patient of the Alexandra Hospital, Cosham (University War Hospital). Following further treatment there, he reported on May 24 to the *Newfoundland Pay & Record Office* at 58, Victoria Street in London where he was provided with a railway pass and sent on his way the following day back to the Regimental Depot in Scotland.



He remained in Ayr for two months.

(Page preceding: *the High Street in Ayr, dominated then as it still is today by the imposing Wallace Tower, as shown on a postcard of the time sent home by a Newfoundland soldier – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo*)

The 27th Re-enforcement Draft from Barry* – Private Cooper one of its number - passed through Southampton on July 22, and arrived in Rouen two days later. This time Private Cooper made it further than the confines of the Base Depot and the hospitals of the city, and after that inevitable period of final training, he reported *to duty* to 1st Battalion on August 28.

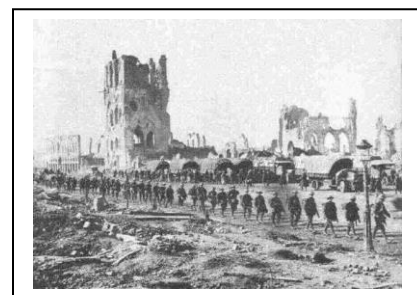


(Right above: *the great and venerable gothic cathedral standing dominant in the centre of the French city of Rouen at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

**During the summer months of 1917, 2nd (Reserve) Battalion had been transferred from Ayr to not-so-distant Barry in the region of Dundee. Initially intended to be a permanent move, the protest from several quarters was so great that the Newfoundlanders were back in Ayr by the third week of September.*

Two detachments of newcomers are recorded in the *Regimental War Diary* as arriving at Penton Camp – in the proximity of Poperinghe, Belgium - on that particular August 28, Private Clarke being one of the total of one-hundred sixty-five *other ranks* comprising those contingents.

Meanwhile, some two months before Private Cooper reported on August 28, the Newfoundlanders had for a second time moved 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 as 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*, borrowing 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*)

1st 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 *Broembek* on October 9.



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

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In fact, on August 28 – the day on which Private Cooper reported back *to duty* – the Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion had just withdrawn from the area of the front; the British Army was about to take a month’s respite to re-enforce and re-organize before continuing a battle which had not lived up to the expectations of the High Command. After a four-week period of fine weather, on September 23 the Newfoundlanders began their return to the fighting although they had suffered four wounded two days prior to that due to long-range artillery fire.

On the day that *Passchendaele* officially recommenced, the rains returned.

Now once more in the trenches, 1st Battalion began to prepare for the next offensive infantry action. It came about two weeks later, on October 9.

The son of John Cooper and Annie Cooper (she later Mrs. John Jones*) – to whom he had allocated a daily allowance of fifty cents from his pay - of Millertown, he was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 9, 1917, while serving with ‘B’ Company in the fighting at the *Broembek*. At home it was the Reverend William Eddy of Millertown who was requested to bear the news to his family.



Ward Mellage Cooper had enlisted at nineteen years of age.

**Through his mother’s second marriage Ward Cooper was likely step-brother to Olivia(?), Ernest and Stanley.*

(Right above: *An innocuous, placid trickle pictured here, the Broembek had overflowed its banks in October of 1917, transforming the surrounding terrain into a swamp. – photograph from 2009*)

Private Ward Mellage Cooper was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

