

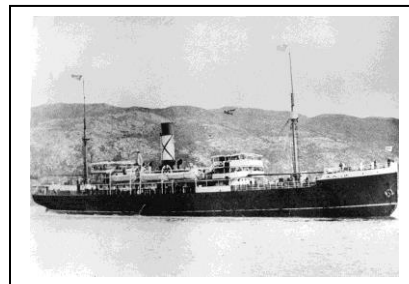


**Private William Joseph Donohue (also *Donahue*) (Regimental Number 2992) is interred in Étapes Military Cemetery – Grave reference LXVIII. B. 29.**

**His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman and earning an annual four hundred dollars - his most recent employer a Joseph Wyse (son of his god-father, David Wyse?) - William Joseph Donohue was a recruit of the Twelfth Draft. He enlisted at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury on Harvey Road in St. John's – *for the duration of the war* and engaged at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 per diem – on July 26, 1916, before then presenting himself for both medical examination and attestation on the following day, July 27.**

**(continued)**

Private Donohue 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 since 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 Donohue 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.



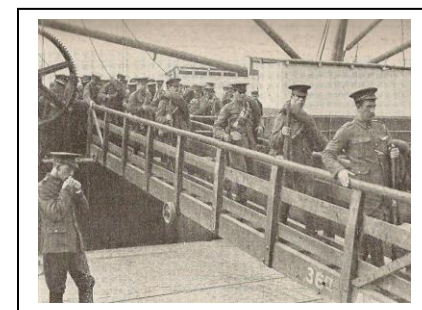
Arriving in England the contingent entrained for the west coast of Scotland. By this time, the Regimental Depot at Ayr had already been in existence to serve as the base for the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment for two years. It was from here – since November of 1915 and 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.

(Right above: *the new race-course at Ayr – opened in 1907 – where men of the Regiment were billeted and where they replaced some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photo from 2012*)

On June 11, 1917, the 25<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Donohue in 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.

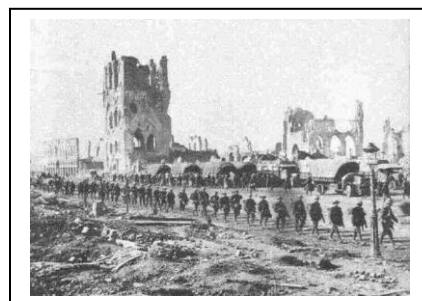


(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

*\*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 Donohue'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.

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*)

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.



(Right: *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.

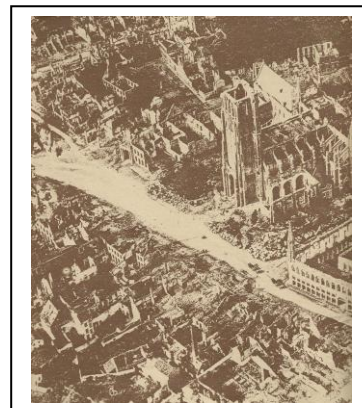


The battle began well for the British who used tanks on a large scale for the first time; but opportunities were squandered and by its close the British had relinquished as much territory as they had gained.

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.

(Previous page: *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*)

In the meantime, in early December of 1917, at the close of the *Battle of Cambrai*, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion – once again badly under-strength due to the heavy casualties incurred – had been 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.

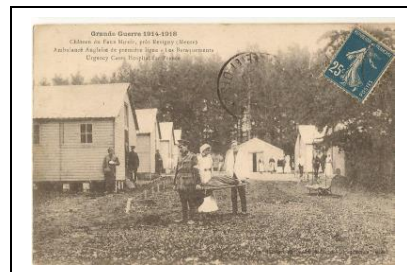


At the beginning of January of 1918, and after that snowy Christmas period spent to the west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion returned to Belgium, to the *Ypres Salient*, for a third time.

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*)

On February 15, at a time when 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn to the community of Steenvoorde on the Franco-Belgian border, Private Donohue was admitted into the 89<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance suffering from orchitis. It is not recorded to where he was forwarded at this time – possibly to a corps rest station - but he was not to be discharged *to duty* until five weeks later – possibly back with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - on March 23.



(Right above: *a British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

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.

(continued)

**(Right: 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.

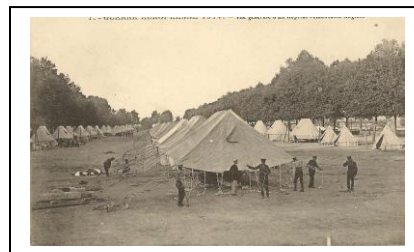
Then a second offensive, *Georgette*, was launched in the northern sector of the front, in Flanders, where the Newfoundlanders were stationed: the date was April 9. Within two days the situation of the Allies was desperate.



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

It was only some two weeks later again, on April 4, that Private Donohue was reporting back to the 89<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, on this occasion with a PUO (*Pain of Unknown Origin*) and from there transferred on an unspecified date – but likely on the same day - to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Casualty Clearing Station at Nine Elms, Poperinghe.

Possibly still a sick man – the records do not seem to document any further diagnosis - Private Donohue was released *to duty* back to his unit and to 'A' Company on April 13: the military situation had become critical by then and the outcome of the *Great War* was, in fact, in the balance.



**(Right: 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*)**

On, April 10, the day after the first heavy bombardments, as the Germans approached the towns of Armentières and Nieppe, troops were deployed to meet them. The Newfoundlanders, due at the time to come out of the line and move back to *the Somme* to stem the German flow there, boarded buses at three o'clock in the afternoon but then 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.

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



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: *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 -14, 1918. Today there are several houses and a convenience store. – photograph from 2009(?)*)



What precise role Private Donohue played is not known (but see paragraph below) - it is recorded only that he was a soldier of 'A' Company - however, from April 10 to 21 was to be a difficult eleven days for all of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's personnel. Nevertheless, somehow, the German breakthrough never materialised and the front finally was stabilised.

The Regimental War Diary cites *...the remainder of 'C' Coy. under Capt. Paterson, M.C. and Hqrs. took up a position along a light railway line and prepared to fight to a finish. ...there can be no doubt that it was Hqrs., 'A' & 'C' Coys. that by their resistance\* saved what would have been at least a very serious position for the whole 34<sup>th</sup> Division\*\*.*

*\*At what point Private Donohue re-joined 'A' Company in the field rather than just on paper is not clear.*

*\*\*88<sup>th</sup> Brigade – therefore 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion – was seconded from 29<sup>th</sup> Division to the 34<sup>th</sup> Division during this critical period.*

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 Étapes, where they arrived at eleven o'clock in the late evening.

They still had a two-hour march to their new quarters.

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On May 1, Private Donohue was admitted into the 24<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Étaples, once more to be diagnosed as with PUO. Then meningitis was suspected. On May 5 he was considered *dangerously ill*. Two days later, on May 7, he was transferred to the 46<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital in the same medical complex.

The son of John Donohue, fisherman, and Mary Donohue (née *Brothers*) – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - of Point Verde, Placentia Bay, he was also brother to Bride, Rosella, Regina, Edward, John, Michael and apparently – according to a letter from his mother - three other siblings.



Private Donohue was reported as having *died of sickness* – of tubercular meningitis and broncho-pneumonia... *aggravated by fatigue & duty while on military service...* in hospital on May 18, 1918.

William Joseph Donahue had enlisted at the age of eighteen years and nine months (birth date October 24, 1898).

His letters to home were signed '*Soldier Billy*'.

(Right above: *Étaples Military Cemetery is the last resting-place for just fewer than eleven thousand soldiers of the Great War and is the largest British burial ground in France – photograph from 2011*)

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

