



Lieutenant John Francis Edens (Regimental Number 883*) is buried in Villers-Plouich Communal Cemetery – Grave reference A. 9.

**Officers who were eventually promoted from the ranks may be identified from their Regimental Number. Other officers who were not from the ranks received the King's Commission, or in the case of those in the Newfoundland Regiment, an Imperial Commission, and were not considered as enlisted. These officers thus had no Regimental Number allotted to them.*

And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist 'for the duration', even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.

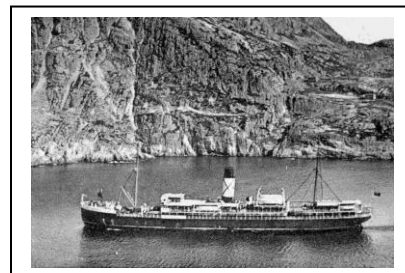
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *bank clerk*, John Francis Edens presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on December 2 of 1914. It was a procedure which was to find him...*Fit for Foreign Service.*

(continued)

John Edens then enlisted - at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10, this including a daily ten-cent Field Allowance, and *for only a twelve-month period* – a month later, on January 4, 1915, before then attesting on that same day.

Some six weeks later he was hospitalized while still in St John's, suffering from appendicitis, from February 25 until March 15.

Some five weeks later again and after convalescence, on April 22, Private Edens embarked for *overseas service* with the two-hundred fifty officers and *other ranks* of 'E' Company onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax. Days later, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening, the detachment began the trans-Atlantic passage on board His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool, arriving in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded.



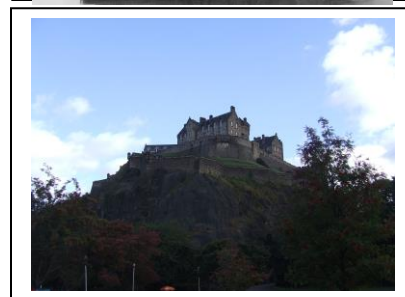
The Newfoundlanders on this occasion sailed from Halifax in the company of the Canadian Army Service Corps Railway Supply Depot.

(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 on 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)

Only one week later, on May 11, the entire Newfoundland contingent was posted to *Stobs Camp* near the Scottish town of Hawick where it was now to remain under canvas to undergo further training until the end of July.



(Right: The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915 – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)

(continued)

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. Meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived ‘E’ – that of Private Edens - and then ‘F’*, were ordered stationed to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion*.

(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* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)



*On July 10, 1915, ‘F’ Company had arrived at *Stobs Camp* from *Newfoundland*, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service.

‘E’ Company - with a few exceptions of personnel who were drafted into the first four Companies which were to travel to the Middle East – and Private Edens thus remained in Scotland to be ordered posted to the newly-established Regimental Depot at the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland. This was to be the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion from where – as of November of that 1915 up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts 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 – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were billeted 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*)



(Right above: *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)

While he was stationed at Ayr, Private Edens received promotion on two occasions: to the rank of lance corporal on September 9, 1915; and then an Imperial Commission and the accompanying appointment to the rank of second lieutenant on November 27, later during that same year.

For the following number of months, apart from a ten-day period of leave in January of the New Year, 1916 – a furlough of which there appear to be no further details - 2nd Lieutenant Edens remained based on Scotland’s west coast, until the following June – with one other exception:

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He was to accompany at a re-enforcement draft – the 4th, embarking in the English south-coast port-city of Southampton on or about April 8 – across the English Channel to the British Expeditionary Force Base Depot in Rouen, before then returning to Ayr.

Second Lieutenant Edens apparently then was again ordered from his posting in the United Kingdom on or about June 5 to *active service*, to become an officer of the British Expeditionary Force in France. He is recorded as having...*passed through London...*with a group of officers on that date rather than as an officer of a draft. The Regimental War Diarist does not appear to have made mention of the date of his reporting *to duty*.

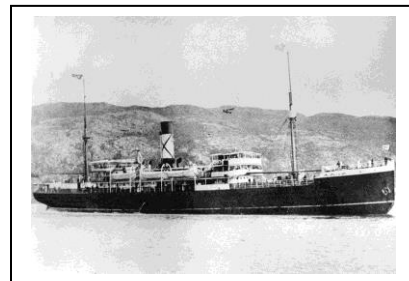
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By the time that Second Lieutenant Edens was to join the Newfoundland Battalion in the field, a contingent from the Dominion* had been on *overseas service* for two years less four months, and on *active service* since August of the previous year. As a private soldier of 'E' Company, of course, he had trained briefly alongside the senior Companies at Edinburgh Castle and at *Stobs Camp* in Scotland before they had left for service at *Gallipoli*.

**The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, It will be remembered, had not officially come into being until the summer of 1915.*

Almost a year before that time, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of some five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's, during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

The first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after 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.



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

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



In the United Kingdom the Newfoundland contingent was to train in several venues: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at *Fort George* – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; at Edinburgh Castle – where as seen beforehand it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles – and where 'E' Company and Private

Edens arrived from Newfoundland; and later again at the tented *Stobs Camp* near the town of Hawick to the south-east of Edinburgh.

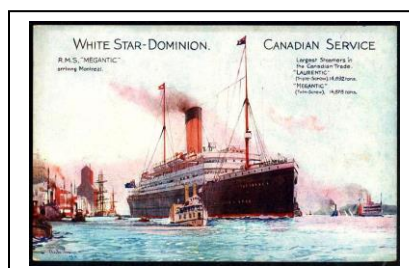
Having then trained at Aldershot for a two-week period in early August, the by-now 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment - comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', and already attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force – had been ordered onto *active service*.



As seen on an earlier page, Private Edens' 'E' Company and the later-arrived 'F' Company were to be ordered to the newly-established Regimental Base Depot at Ayr.

(Right above: *Some of the men of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915 – 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 of 1915, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment 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 where, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on the night of September 19-20, the Newfoundland force was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *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 above: *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: *A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where the 1st Battalion was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)*

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

(Right below: *An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from the 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 Bay, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.*



November 26 had seen the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes during the *Gallipoli Campaign*. A freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm had struck the *Suvla Bay* area on that day and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival from the wrath of Nature rather than from that of the enemy was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties in both camps, 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 had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite but the end of the *Gallipoli Campaign* had already been in sight. After the storm, the Newfoundlanders were to remain stationed at *Suvla Bay* for only a further twenty-five days.

By that time they were to have served there for exactly three months to the day.

On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the 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 was the respite to be 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 above: *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 and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

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

(Right: 'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation in January of 1916 – 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: The same '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)



When the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, to arrive there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.



**Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.*

(Right above: 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)



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



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

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

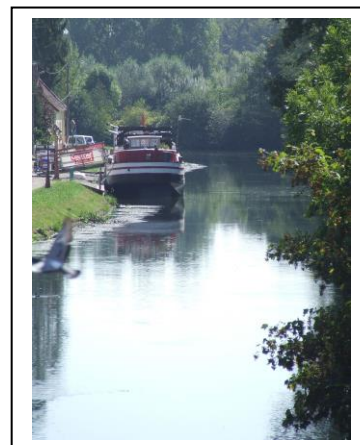
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train had found its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having travelled unused 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 marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to become a part of their history.

On April 13, the 1st Battalion had marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

(Right: A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010)



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 was to then be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.

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

The Newfoundlanders were also soon to be preparing for the 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 a part of that preparation was to be the arrival of reinforcements in the days prior to the attack



Second Lieutenant Edens, of course, had been one of those.

* * * * *

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*.

(Preceding page: *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)



(Right: *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.*



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



(Right above: *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 above: *A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland - dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel* – from...?)

While his name appears on the 1st Battalion nominal roll on July 1, 1916, Second Lieutenant Edens did not figure in the action of the day. According to the records, he had either been seconded to other duties elsewhere at the time or – and this latter is the likelihood - he was one of the fourteen officers and eighty-three other ranks comprising the ten per cent reserve. This force was held back at Louvencourt until late in the day of July 1 when the fighting had for the most part subsided.



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****The well-known roll-call of July 2 of those who survived the battle unscathed was not officially recorded until two days later. The roll call of those who had been in the ten per cent reserve of fourteen officers and eighty-three men held back for most of the day at Louvencourt was apparently also recorded only later. Thus the inscription 'With Battalion 4/7/16' on certain records.***

(Preceding page: A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))

After the events of the morning of July 1, 1916, such had then been the dire condition of the attacking British forces that it had been feared that a German counter-assault might well annihilate what had managed to survive of the British Expeditionary Force on *the Somme*.

The few remnants of the Newfoundland Battalion – and of the other depleted British units - had thus remained in the trenches perhaps fearing the worst, and at night searching for the wounded and burying the dead. It was to be July 6 before the Newfoundlanders were to be relieved from the forward area and to be ordered withdrawn to Englebelmer.



It had then been a further two days before the unit had marched further again to the rear area and to billets in the village of Mailly-Maillet.

(Right above: *The re-constructed village of Mailly-Maillet – the French Monument aux Morts in the foreground - is twinned with the community of Torbay, St. John's East. – photograph from 2009*)

There on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported *to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the events at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power having arrived, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14th of July, 1916, the 1st Battalion still numbered only... *11 officers and 260 rifles...* after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

On July 27-28 of 1916, the 1st Battalion - still under battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong, even after further re-enforcement – had moved north and entered into the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

It had been ordered to the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate on the entire *Western Front*, there to continue to re-enforce and to re-organize after the ordeal of Beaumont-Hamel.

(Right: *The entrance to 'A' Company's quarters – obviously renovated since that time - in the ramparts of the city of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



(continued)

The Salient – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders' posting there; yet they nonetheless incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

Then on October 8, after having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the 1st Battalion had been ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.

(Right: *An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the 'Ville morte'. – from Illustration*)

Four days after that return to France, on October 12, 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to the offensive; it was at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.

The encounter had proved to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred and thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain.

Second Lieutenant Edens is recorded in the Regimental War Diary as having played his role in the attack with 'D' Company but was not one of the casualties of the day.

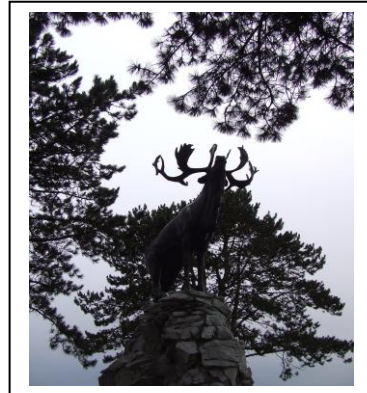
(Right above: *This is the ground over which the 1st Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon. – photograph from 2007*)

The Newfoundland Battalion was not to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it would supply two-hundred fifty men to act as stretcher-bearers in an attack undertaken by troops of two British regiments in the 88th Brigade.

(Right above: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's advance of October 12, 1916. – photograph from 2012*)

(Right: *Stretcher-bearers not only shared the dangers of the battle-field with their arms-bearing comrades, but they often spent a longer period of time exposed to those same perils. This photograph was likely taken during First Somme. – from Illustration*)

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On October 30, the Newfoundland unit had retired to the rear from the Gueudecourt area. It had been serving in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day.

The Newfoundlanders were now to spend two weeks withdrawn to the area of Ville-sous-Corbie, re-enforcing and reorganizing. It would not be until November 15 that the 1st Battalion began to wend its way back to the front lines. There it continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period broken only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas period*, encamped well behind the lines.



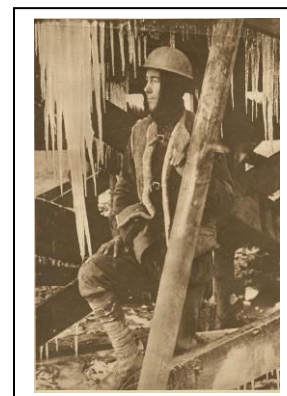
(Right above: *A British camp, in not particularly clement conditions, somewhere on the Continent during the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

**Broken for Lieutenant Edens, however, by a period of leave back to England – from December 22 until January 1, New Year's Day, of 1917.*



(Right above: *This was London – in fact here showing the City of Westminster in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913 and just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

After their six-week Christmas respite, the Newfoundlanders *officially* returned to *active service* on January 23, although they had been back in the trenches already by that date and had by then incurred their first casualties of the New Year. The only infantry activity which directly involved the Newfoundland Battalion during that entire six-month period – from Gueudecourt in mid-October, 1916, 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 was to bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.



(Right above: *A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, their unit relieved by the Newfoundlanders on March 1, enjoys his cigarette in the cold of the trenches at Sailly-Saillisel during the winter of 1916-1917. – from Illustration*)

(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 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 were even to have the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.

(Right: *The Prime Minister of Newfoundland visiting the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, encamped at Meaulté – from *The War Illustrated**)



On March 29, the Newfoundlanders began to make their way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, the march to finish amid the rubble of the village of Monchy-le-Preux.

(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras at the time of the Great War – from *Illustration**)



(Right: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood on Vimy Ridge since 1936 – photograph from 2010*)



On April 9 the British Army was to launch an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a major French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties this attack was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, its only positive episode to be the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday, 1917.



While the British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, the French *Bataille du Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(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 1st Battalion was to play its part during the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at the 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, the ineptly-planned action at Monchy-le-Preux would prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war, four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone*.



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**It was also an action in which a DSO, an MC and eight MMs were won by a small group of nine personnel of the Battalion – the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) awarded to the unit's Commanding officer. An MM for the same action was also presented to a private from the Essex Regiment .*

(Preceding page: Newfoundland troops taking their ease just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux – from The War Illustrated)

It is not certain whether Second Lieutenant Edens played a part on April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux: the Regimental War Diary records him and a small detachment of six *other ranks* returning...*to duty with Battalion...*from hospital on April 28 – but there appears to be no mention of any date of admission or of any cause of the hospitalization.

On April 30, the Diarist then notes his promotion to First Lieutenant, retroactive to November 27 of 1916.

The final action in which the Newfoundland Battalion was to be involved during the *Battle of Arras* would be the engagement of April 23 at *Les Fosses Farm*. This in fact had been an element of a larger offensive undertaken at the time by units of the British 5th, 3rd and 1st Armies. It apparently had not been a particularly successful venture, at least not in the area of the 1st Battalion, several of the adjacent units reporting having been driven back by German counter-attacks, actions accompanied by heavy losses.

Late on that same evening the Newfoundlanders had retired to the relative calm of Arras.

That month of May was to be a period when the Newfoundlanders would be moved hither and thither on the *Arras Front*, marching into and out of the trenches. While there was to be the ever-present artillery-fire, concerted infantry action, particularly post-May 15 – the end of the *Battle of Arras* - apart from marching, was limited.

At the outset of June, the Newfoundland unit was ordered retired from the line to the vicinity of the community of Bonneville, there to spend its time re-enforcing, re-organizing and training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.

(Right: Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville – not Bonneville - in early May, perhaps the 7th, of 1917 – from The War Illustrated)

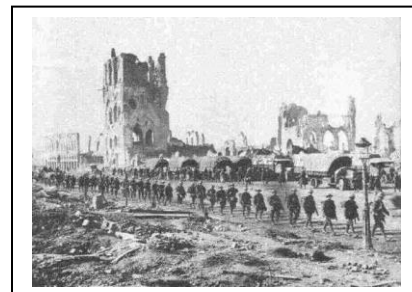


The Newfoundlanders had then soon once again been moving north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again into the vicinity of Ypres and...*the Salient*, their first posting to the banks of the *Yser Canal* just to the north of the city.

(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, manned its eastern bank: East is to the right – photograph from 2014)



This low-lying area, Belgian *Flanders*, the only part of the country unoccupied by German forces, had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917.



(Right: *Troops arriving from the railway station in single file, march past the vestiges of the historic Cloth Hall and through the rubble of the medieval city centre of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer or early autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)

Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was to come to be better known to history simply as *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a not-very high ridge to the north-east that later was to be cited as having been – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.



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

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)



The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army – as were to be by then the Australians, the New Zealanders and the Canadians – all of whose troops had floundered their way across the sodden and shell-torn countryside of Flanders.

Notably the Newfoundland Battalion at *Passchendaele* was to fight in two major engagements: at the *Steenbeek* on August 16; and at the *Broembeek* (see both immediately below) on October 9.

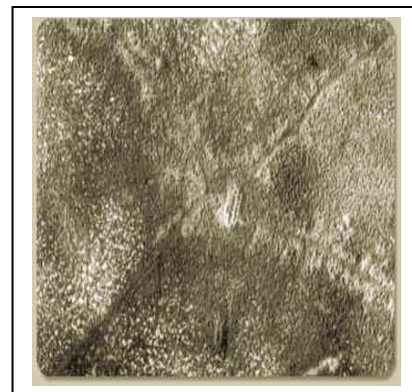
At the former it had incurred nine *killed in action*, ninety-three *wounded*, and one *missing in action*; at the *Broembeek* the cost would be higher: forty-eight *killed or died of wounds*, one-hundred thirty-two *wounded* and fifteen *missing in action*.



The name of Lieutenant Edens does not appear on the list of officers taking part in the action at the *Steenbeek*. No such list appears to exist for the *Broembeek*, thus it may well be that he played his anonymous role there on October 9.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *This is the area of the Steenbeek – the stream runs close to the line of trees - and is therefore close to where the Newfoundland Battalion fought the engagement of August 16, 1917. It is some eight kilometres distant from a village called Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *The once-village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the conclusion of the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

It was to be only two days after this last-mentioned confrontation that the 1st Battalion had marched to the railway station at Elverdinghe from there to be transported to *Swindon Camp* in the area of Proven. Having remained there for five days to be both re-enforced and bombed, on the morning of October 17 the unit once more boarded a train. By ten-thirty that same evening, the Battalion had arrived just to the west of the city of Arras and would now march the final few kilometres to its billets in the community of Berles-au-Bois.

The Newfoundlanders were still there, at Berles-au-Bois, four weeks and two days later when, on November 17 the Battalion was once again to travel by train, on this occasion in a south-easterly direction to the town of Peronne. From there it began to move further eastward on foot towards the theatre of the battle now imminent.

On November 19, while on the move once more, it was issued as it went with... *war stores, rations and equipment*. For much of that night it marched to the assembly areas from where, at twenty minutes past six on that morning of November 20 – Zero Hour – the Newfoundland unit, not being in the first wave of the attack, moved up into its forming-up area. From those forward position, some hours later, at ten minutes past ten, bugles blowing, the 1st Battalion advanced to the fray.

This new offensive – apparently initially conceived to be no more than a large-scale raid - 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 to be directly involved at all times during that period.

The battle was to begin well for the British who used tanks on a large scale for the first time; but opportunities were squandered, there were no troops available to exploit what was, admittedly, a hoped-for yet unexpected success, and by the close of the battle, the Germans had counter-attacked and the British had relinquished as much – more in places - territory as they had originally gained.



The 1st Battalion was again dealt with severely, in the vicinity of Marcoing, Masnières - where a Caribou stands today - and the Canal St-Quentin which flows through both places: of the total of five-hundred fifty-three officers and men who went into battle, two-hundred forty-eight had become casualties by the end of only the second day*.

(continued)

(Preceding 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*)



(Right: *The Caribou at Masnières stands on the high ground to the north of the community. The seizure of this terrain was the final objective of the 1st Battalion on November 20; however, whether its capture was ever achieved is at best controversial. – photograph from 2012*)

**At five-hundred fifty-three all ranks – not counting the aforementioned ten per cent reserve - the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment even at the outset of the operation was operating at just over fifty per cent of establishment strength: not that it would have been any consolation had it been known, but a goodly number of battalions in all the British and Dominion forces were encountering the same problem.*

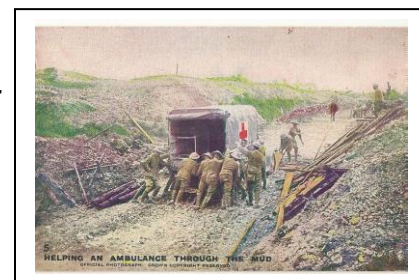


(Right above: *A number of graves of soldiers from the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment in Marcoing Military Cemetery. Here, as is almost always the case elsewhere, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, has identified them as being Canadian. – photograph from 2010*)

The son of Thomas J. Edens, deceased June 22, 1920, proprietor of two *grocery and provisions* outlets in the City, and of Margaret Mary Edens (*née Walsh*)* of 39, Queens's Road in St. John's, he was reported as having been *killed in action* on November 20, 1917, the first day of the fighting near the French villages of Marcoing and Masnières.

**The couple married on February 13, 1889.*

A second report has him wounded on the 21st, and *dying of wounds* at the 21st Casualty Clearing Station in the village of Ytres on November 22. A third account – likely the most reliable - from the chaplain who buried him, a Reverend Keary, cites him dying on November 20 at the 17th Field Ambulance.



(Right above: *transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)

Lance Corporal Janes, Number 2149, reported that: *'Lieutenant Edens was wounded in the side by a bullet. His wound was dressed and he was taken by 'D' Company stretcher-bearers who reportedly handed him over to the Medical Officer of the King's Royal Rifles of 20th Division at the Rest Station in Sorrel.'*

(continued)

(Right: *The Caribou at Masnières today stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's first-day objective, an objective probably never realized. – photograph from 2012*)



It was decided on December 17, 1917, that his record should be amended so as to finally read *killed in action or died of wounds on or shortly after 20/11/17* – authority: burial report of Reverend Keary submitted December 15.

John Francis Edens had enlisted at the *declared* age of nineteen years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, October 3, 1896 (from Roman Catholic Parish Records).



His brother Leonard - seconded from the Newfoundland Regiment to the Royal Flying Corps - was to die in German hands, of his wounds*, in March of the following year, 1918 (see immediately below); a further brother, Francis-Augustine, Lieutenant, Regimental Number 2894, would go overseas in early 1918 and survive the conflict; a sister, Margaret-Mary (also found as *Gertrude-Mary(?)*), was in Halifax at the time of the *Explosion* in December of 1917, but seemingly also survived. He had two other siblings: Mary and Gerrard.

Lieutenant Leonard Ayng Edens (Regimental Number 2547 and attached to Number 29 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps) is buried in Harlebeke New Cemetery – Grave reference IX. A. 6. (His story is to be found elsewhere in these files and his grave-stone is shown above.)*

**Although he may have died after crashing in his plane behind enemy lines; the date is controversial as well, March 18th being cited by the British authorities and engraved on his head-stone (see in the file of Lieutenant Leonard Edens).*



(Right: *The vestiges in Belvedere Cemetery in St. John's of a family memorial which once stood to commemorate the sacrifice of Lieutenant John Francis Edens and of his brother Lieutenant Leonard Ayng Edens – photograph from 2015*)

Lieutenant John Francis Edens was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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 – February 11, 2023.