



Private Alphonse (*Alphonse*) Joseph Edwards (Regimental Number 2287) is buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery – Grave reference IX. B. 47.

His occupation prior to military service that of a painter earning a monthly thirty dollars, Alphonse Edwards was a recruit of the Tenth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on March 22 of 1916, he then enlisted – engaged *for the duration of the war* at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on the following day. One day later again he attested, on March 24.

It was the 28<sup>th</sup> of August before Private Edwards embarked for passage to the United Kingdom and it was on His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian*\* (right) that he was to make the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom. This was the third such voyage that the ship was to make in 1916, the Newfoundlanders likely sharing the vessel with Canadian personnel\*\*. He sailed as a soldier of 11<sup>th</sup> Platoon, Section 11, of 'C' Company of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion\*\*\*.



*\*Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War.*

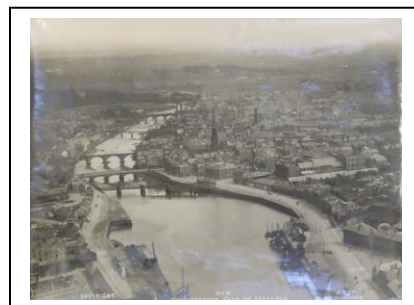
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***\*\*Sicilian had been re-fitted in 1906 to carry just under twelve-hundred passengers, thus her journey to St. John's in March of 1916 was likely followed by the short passage to Halifax to embark Canadian military personnel. Likewise, in July, she had sailed from Montreal on July 16 with Canadians to embark the Newfoundlanders awaiting passage overseas.***

***\*\*\*3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was based in St. John's, whereas 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion – 'E', 'F', 'G' and 'H' Companies - was stationed in the United Kingdom. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was the edge of the sword – 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies – and was posted to the front.***

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom, the ship docked in the south-coast naval port of Devonport from where the Newfoundlanders entrained for the journey north to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot where each newcomer was delegated to one of the four resident companies - and the where the somewhat confusing title of 'C' Company was abandoned.

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 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-upon-Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr)***

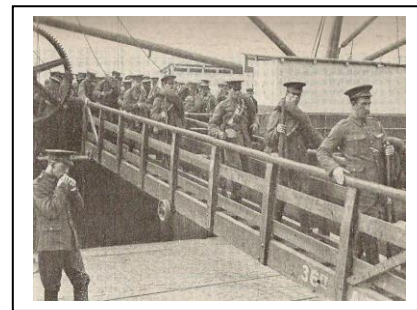
At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to accommodate the new arrivals – plus men from other regiments who were still being billeted in the area – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in Ayr itself, and the other ranks had been 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 – photo from 2012)***

The 14<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Edwards among that contingent - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on November 30 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, December 1, 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.

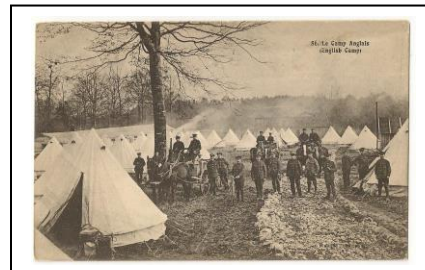
(Right: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)



*\*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.*

When that rendezvous was effected it was late in the day of December 11 – which is most likely why it is recorded elsewhere as happening on the 12<sup>th</sup>. 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 Edwards among that contingent - reported to *duty*.



The newcomers were just in time for the six-week Christmas period to be spent encamped well behind the lines in *Corps Reserve* and near to the city of Amiens.

(Right above: *a British encampment somewhere on the Continent, apparently during the winter season – from a vintage post-card*)

The Newfoundlanders officially returned to active service on January 23 of 1917, although they had already been back in the trenches and had suffered their first casualties – and fatality – of the year. The next five weeks differed little from those of the preceding autumn: in and out of the trenches, the occasional dead, wounded and ill, and the occasional winter's day which did not seem to bother the Newfoundlanders. Anything was better than rain and mud.

The Newfoundlanders officially returned to active service on January 23 of the New Year, 1917, although they had already been back in the trenches by that time and had suffered their first casualties of the New Year. The next five weeks were to be little different: in and out of the trenches, the occasional dead, wounded and ill - and the occasional winter's snowy day which was to seem not to bother the Newfoundlanders. Perhaps anything was better than rain and mud.

On February 7, Private Edwards was admitted into the 38<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly, to the west of Albert, and was there diagnosed as suffering from dysentery. Soon thereafter he was transferred to the 25<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital in Rouen where it was finally decided to invalid him to the United Kingdom. He was placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Panama* (right) for the cross-Channel journey on March 7.



Once back in England on the next day, he was admitted into the University War Hospital in Southampton where he remained until April 12. Private Edwards was then sent to the Dysentery Convalescent Hospital, Barton, New Milton, from where he was discharged on May 9.

Once released, he was accorded the customary ten-day furlough – in his case from May 9 to 18 – a period of leave accorded military personnel upon discharge from medical care in the United Kingdom. Private Edwards was then immediately ordered to report *to duty* to the Regimental Depot at Ayr.



(Right above: *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*)

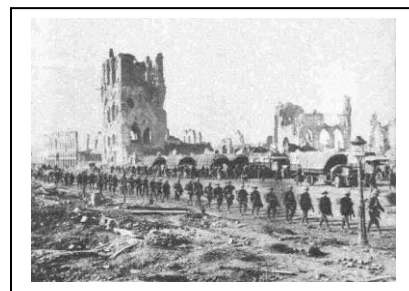
Some three months later the 28<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft left Barry\* and travelled south to the English Channel port of Folkestone. On August 5 the contingent sailed to Rouen, arriving there two days later. Once again, Private Edwards was obliged to undergo those several days of final preparations in which the Base Depot at Rouen specialized.

*\*During the summer months of 1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion had been transferred from Ayr to not-so-distant Barry in the region of the city 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.*

Private Edwards was in one of the two drafts totalling one-hundred sixty-six personnel which arrived from Rouen at Penton Camp, on the outskirts of the Belgian town of Poperinghe on August 28. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had withdrawn from the front lines on the 24<sup>th</sup> and did not return to the front for an entire month. This period, a more-or-less 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 by then incurred four wounded two days prior to that due to long-range artillery fire. In their trenches they prepared for the next offensive infantry action. It came about two weeks later at the *Broembek*.

By the time of the arrival of Private Edwards on August 28, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been in Belgium for two months, since the end of June - and was once again in the *Ypres Salient*. This had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917. Officially designated as 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.



(continued)

*(Preceding page: 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)*

The Newfoundlanders were to remain 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion fought in two major engagements during this period: at the *Steenbeek* on August 16, and at the *Broembeek* on October 9. While Private Edwards was still at the Base Depot in Rouen on the date of the *Steenbeek*, he must – there being no evidence to the contrary – be presumed to have played his part on October 9.



*(Above 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 – some personnel even having been granted at the time a ten-day furlough back to the United Kingdom.

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.



*(Above right: 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)*

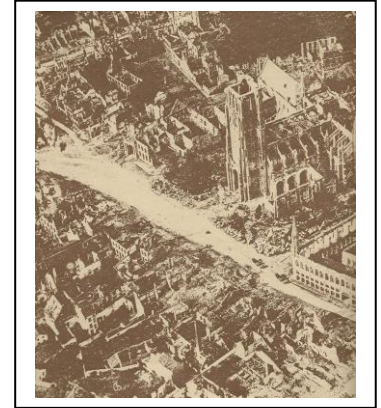
At the close of the *Battle of Cambrai*, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment – once again badly under-strength due to the heavy casualties incurred – was withdrawn from the area of the front lines to re-enforce and to re-organize. The following weeks had been spent at first to the south-west of the city of Arras, at Humbercourt and then at some distance to the north-west, at Fressin.

The weather obliged and even 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 were ordered into Belgium, to the *Ypres Salient*, for a third time.

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

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



Meanwhile, 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.

(Right above: *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 leave 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, some three hours later.

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**(Right: *the area of La Crêche - 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 action 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*)**

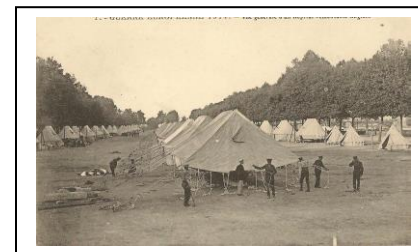
What exact role Private Edwards played during this frenetic period is not known – it is apparently not even recorded of which Company he was a soldier - but from April 10 to 21 was to be a difficult eleven days for all of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's personnel. Nevertheless, somehow, the German breakthrough never materialised and the front finally stabilised.



**(Right above: *These are the De Seule crossroads almost one-hundred years later, lying astride the Franco-Belgian frontier, and 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(?)*)**

On April 19, no infantry action was reported in the vicinity 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion positions at the front near the town of Bailleul, and the Newfoundlanders were relieved by a French unit. But there were apparently still casualties – perhaps from artillery fire – since Private Edwards was reported as having been wounded, suffering injuries to the head inflicted by shrapnel, on that date.

He was eventually evacuated – from where seems not to be recorded – to the 64<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station - at the time perhaps at Mendinghem, perhaps at Watten - four days later, on April 23.



**(continued)**

(Previous page: 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)

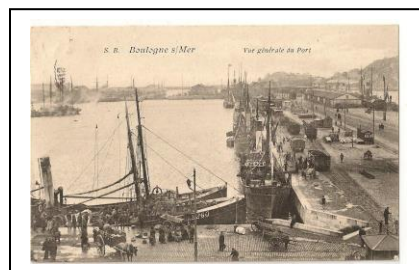
On the 25<sup>th</sup> Private Edwards was transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian General Hospital at Wimereux, on the French coast.

(Right: the French coastal resort town of Wimereux which became an important medical centre during the conflict at a time just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card)



On both April 27 and 29 his condition was reported to be *dangerous*.

The son of Joseph Edwards, painter in business with his sons John and Alphonse, and Clara Edwards – to whom he had allotted a daily fifty cents from his pay - of Pennywell Road in St. John's\* - but by August of 1919 citing their address as being 1, King Street, Grand Falls - he was also the brother of at least John, Alphonse, Kate, Alice, Gertrude, Leo and Nellie.



Private Edwards was reported as having *died of wounds* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian General Hospital at seven o'clock in the evening of May 5, 1918.

Alphonse Joseph Edwards had enlisted at the age of nineteen years and five months.

\*of 21, Barron Street in the City in the business directory of 1913

(Right above: the French port of Boulogne - in whose Eastern Cemetery Private Edwards lies buried – at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The photograph of Private Edwards is from the Royal Canadian Legion publication *Lest We Forget*.



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

