

Private John Charles Edwards (Regimental Number 450) is interred in Earlsfield (Wandsworth) Cemetery – Grave reference Nfld. 763.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *painter* working for his father, and earning nine dollars per week, John Charles Edwards presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on September 7 of 1914 – four three weeks and six days after the *Declaration of War* – for a medical examination. It was an exercise which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

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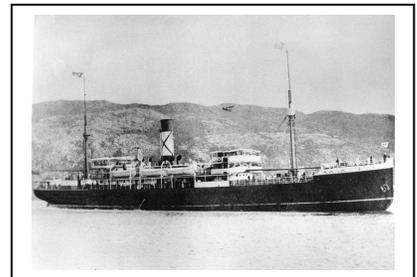
A single day later, on September 8, John Charles Edwards returned to the *C.L.B. Armoury*, on this second occasion for enlistment, whereupon he was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*. A recruit of the First Draft, he was likely now ordered to the tented area by that time established on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the East End of St. John's where a four-five week course of training was already under way.

The regimental authorities were *also* busy by now, preparing for the transport of this, the first body of volunteers, to *overseas* - and later to *active* - *service*.

At the beginning of the month of October a large number of the new recruits underwent attestation; Private Edwards was one of that number, taking his oath of allegiance on the first day of October.

Two days later, after the Newfoundland contingent – it was not as yet a battalion – of 'A' and 'B' Companies had paraded through the city, it embarked onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* which was awaiting in St. John's Harbour.

Private Edwards and his comrades-in-arms of the *First Five Hundred* – also to be known to history as the *Blue Puttees* – were now to sit on board ship for the best part of a day as it was not to be until the morrow that *Florizel* would sail to the south coast of the Island and to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the Canadian Division to the United Kingdom.



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

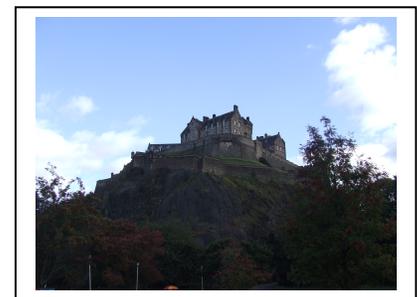
(Right below: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)

In the United Kingdom this first Newfoundland contingent was to train in three venues during the late autumn of 1914 and then the winter of 1914-1915: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; and lastly at Edinburgh Castle where the unit was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.



(Right below: *The venerable Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011*)

Some three months later, on May 11, and some seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit – by now 'A' and 'B' Companies re-enforced by 'C', 'D', and 'E' - was ordered moved from the Scottish capital to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.



It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent received the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus rendered ready to be ordered on ‘active service’.

**The number was about fifteen hundred, sufficient to provide four ‘fighting’ companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)

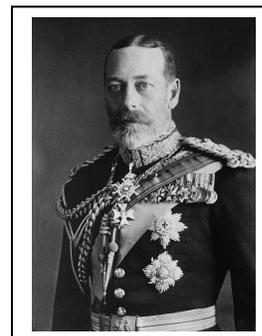


At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ – Private Edwards among their ranks - were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot.

This force, now designated as the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

Meanwhile the two junior companies, the later-arrived ‘E’ and the aforementioned last-arrived ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

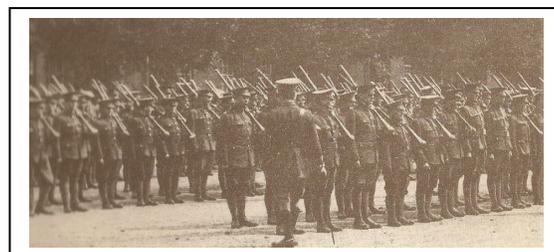
(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – the photograph is from Bain News Services via the Wikipedia web-site.*)



It was also during this period while at Aldershot that on August 14 Private Edwards was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion 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 a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was likely to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

(Right: *Some of the personnel of ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to its departure to active service on the Gallipoli Peninsula – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)*



(continued)

While 'E' and 'F' Companies were beginning their posting to the Regimental Depot at Ayr, on August 20 of 1915 the 1st Battalion embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Plymouth-Devonport onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks.



(Right adjacent: *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.*)

There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right: *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: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli – Dardanelles to the French, Çanakkale to the Turks. – 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*)



When the Newfoundlanders landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* on that September night of 1915 they would disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even ever since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, had proved 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.



(Preceding page: *No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from Provincial Archives*)

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

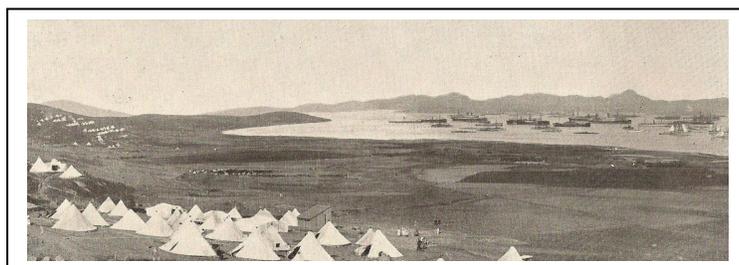
November 26 would see the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes at *Gallipoli*; a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm was to strike the *Suvla Bay* area and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival rather than the enemy had been the priority.

There were to be many casualties on both sides, 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, however, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

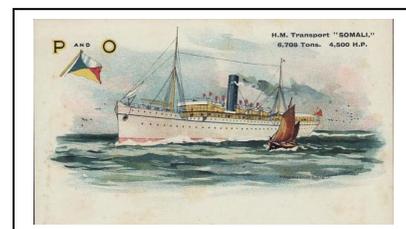
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Private Edwards was to be evacuated to the 54th Casualty Clearing Station at *Suvla Bay* on November 26, 1915, only a day after that cataclysmic episode, although it was neither the aforementioned trench-foot or frost-bite from which he was suffering: it was jaundice. Three days later, on the 29th, Private Edwards was ferried to the Greek island of Lemnos and there admitted into the 2nd Australian Hospital at Mudros.

(Right: *By the end of the summer and during the autumn of 1915, Allied medical units – the majority of them under canvas - almost completely surrounded the always-busy Mudros Bay and its minuscule harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos. – from Illustration*)



A month later again, on December 26, Boxing Day of 1915, he was embarked onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Somali* for passage to the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta where he was to receive further medical attention at St. Patrick's Military Hospital. He was admitted on December 29.



(Right above: *The image of a peace-time 'Somali' before the Great War is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The ship had been completed in 1901 to serve as a passenger vessel with the P&O Steam Navigation Company which she had done until February of 1915 when she was requisitioned for conversion into a hospital ship. In April of 1916 she reverted to the role of a troop-transport, a role she continued to play until after the end of the conflict. 'Somali' was scrapped in 1923.*)

Next came a stay at *All Saints' Convalescent Camp*, also on Malta, beginning on January 12 of the New Year, 1916, from where he was discharged to *active service*, sailing on board His Majesty's Transport *Simla* on February 13 to Egypt, most likely to report to the Base Depot at Sidi Bishr, Alexandria.

(Right: *Some of the former Royal Navy medical facilities, today disused and abandoned, which are still to be found on the now-independent - since 1964 - island nation of Malta - photograph from 2011*)



It would just more than two weeks later, while the Newfoundland unit was to be spending time encamped at Suez (see below) that Private Edwards re-joined his fellow Newfoundlanders, on March 1.

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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 were to be 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 would 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, Indian and *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at *Gallipoli* – had now been only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

(Right above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation - from Illustration*)

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

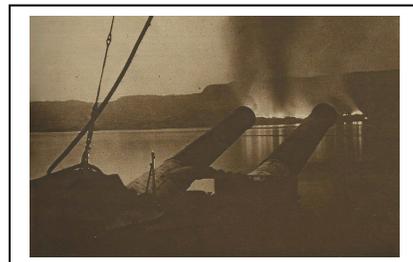


**Lieutenant Owen Steele of St. John's, Newfoundland, is cited as having been the last soldier of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to step into the final small boat to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

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(Preceding page: *'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*)

Immediately after 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 had then been immediately transferred southward to the vicinity of 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*)

When Private Edwards reported back to duty on March 1, 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion had already spent close to seven weeks at Suez – and it was now to prepare for its departure.

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After that two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1st Battalion – with Private Edwards once again one of that number - were to board His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage 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 as it was 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*)

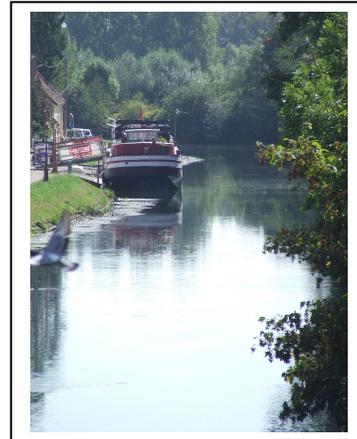


Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably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

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



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

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

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

(Right: *A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel* – photograph from 2009(?))



Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Maily-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing for the upcoming 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.

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*.



(continued)

(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: *A further view of 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, just as depressing, the carnage of *the Somme* would continue for the next four and a half months.

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

On July 1, 1916, at Beaumont-Hamel, while serving with 'A' Company during the fighting of that first day of *the Somme*, Private Edwards suffered a wound to the head.

Three days later, on July 4, he was placed on board an unspecified hospital ship and transported to England where he was admitted on the morrow into the *Royal Victorian Hospital* at Netley, on the south coast of England.

(Right: *Evacuating Canadian casualties to the rear in hand-carts after an infantry operation – somewhere on the Somme – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



(continued)

The son of Joseph Edwards, painter, and of Clara Edwards (née *Chidley*)* – to whom he had allocated a daily sixty cents from his pay - originally of Grand Falls before moving to St. John's but, by this time of his enlistment, living at 19 or 20, Pennywell Road, also in St. John's – later to Pleasant Street and later again to Number 1, King Street, in Grand Falls – he was also brother to Alphonsus-Joseph (see ** below), Catherine-Anne (*Kate*), Nellie, Leo, Gertrude and to Alice-Maud.

**The couple had married in St. John's on November 22, 1893.*

Private Edwards was reported as having...*died of wounds*...in the *Royal Victorian Hospital, Netley*, on July 21, 1916. He had succumbed to those wounds - and to a septic blood clot - suffered on July 1. Private Edwards was interred just one day later, on July 22.



(Right: *the Royal Victorian Hospital, Netley* – from a vintage post-card)

John Charles Edwards had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, June 24, 1895 (from a copy of Roman Catholic Parish Records).

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****His younger brother Alphonsus Joseph Edwards had enlisted in March of 1916 and had sailed on August 28 of that year on board 'Sicilian' directly to the United Kingdom. Having thereupon trained in Scotland, he was dispatched to join the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment by that time serving on the Continent in the aftermath of the First Battle of the Somme.**

Some two months later he was on his way to hospital in southern England, there to be treated for three months for a case of dysentery. Cured he was posted back to the Regimental Depot at Ayr before being dispatched back to France on August 5. Having re-joined the Newfoundland unit – by that time in Belgium – Private Edwards would then serve in the Newfoundland unit's last action of the horrendous Battle of Passchendaele.



The Newfoundlanders returned south to France in mid-October of that 1917, there to prepare for the Battalion's participation in the short – two weeks – Battle of Cambrai. A Christmas pause followed before the unit turned northward again to be stationed for three months in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier.

The Germans struck on April 9 and the following ten days was a frantic struggle for survival, for the Allied forces in the area and for the individual soldier. It was a struggle which Private Alphonsus Joseph Edwards was not to win.

On April 19 he was struck in the head by flying shrapnel and evacuated from the field to eventually – four days later - be admitted into the 64th Casualty Clearing Station before

being forwarded two days later to the 2nd Australian General Hospital established in the coastal community of Wimereux.

On May 5 Private Edwards lost his war and was reported as having...died of wounds...in the 2nd Australian General Hospital. He was interred in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery as seen on the preceding page.

A more complete version of his story is to be found elsewhere among these files.

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The following is has been extracted from a report of Private John Charles Edwards' funeral sent by letter to his family:

On July 22, his remains were transferred by rail to Waterloo Station from which place they were taken by hearse to the London Borough of Wandsworth. There, on that same day, these were interred together with those of Private P. J. Brown, No. 1053, of the Newfoundland Regiment, in Magdelene Road (Earlsfield) Cemetery, Wandsworth, in the Newfoundland Plot.



There were on the gravesites two wreaths of lilies of an unknown provenance, also lilies and roses sent by a Miss A. C. Westcott, artificial roses and white lilies from men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and laurel leaves and roses offered by the Newfoundland War Contingent Association.

Two priests conducted the service to which four men of the Newfoundland Regiment, at the time convalescing at the nearby 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth, attended. A three-round salute was fired by a detachment of the Rifle Brigade, and the Last Post was sounded at precisely 3.30 pm.



(Right above: *The photograph of Private John Charles Edwards is from the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right above: *The Newfoundland Plot in Magdelene Road (Earlsfield) Cemetery, Wandsworth, on a wet day in London – photograph from 2009*)

Private John Charles Edwards was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) 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 – January 31, 2023.