

GILBERT, A.

Private Alexander Gilbert (Regimental Number 2891), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated beneath the Caribou in Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman earning a monthly \$34.00, Alexander (*Sandy*) Gilbert was a recruit of the Tenth Draft. He presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's and also enlisted *for the duration of the war* - engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on June 19, 1916, before attesting on the following day, June 20.

It was the 28<sup>th</sup> of August when Private Gilbert embarked for passage to the United Kingdom and it was on board His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian*\* (right) that he was to make the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom.

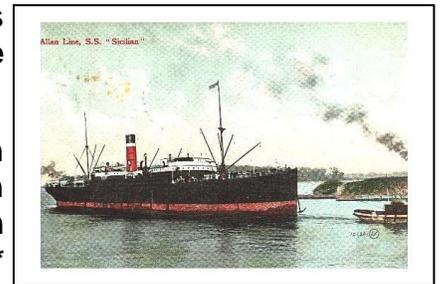
This was the third such voyage that the ship was to make in 1916, the Newfoundlanders likely sharing the vessel with Canadian personnel\*\*. Private Gilbert was a soldier of Section 9, Platoon 11, 'C' (*Reserve*) Company of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (see \*\*\* below), and one of a draft of two-hundred forty-two personnel from Newfoundland in all.

*\*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.*

*\*\*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*)

During the winter of 1915-1916 the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion had been lodged in several venues, at a nearby military camp at Gales, but also as far afield as Paisley Barracks, some sixty-five kilometres distant. However, by the spring of 1916 the difficulty had been overcome by housing the men in a requisitioned school, in a tented community and in the Ayr Racecourse Grandstand, all in the district of Newton-upon-Ayr.



(Right above: *the new race-course at 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 Gilbert among its ranks - 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. It 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.



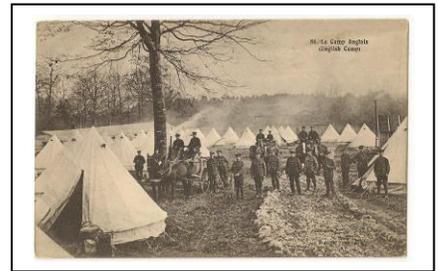
(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

*\*Apparently, the standard length of time for this final training at the outset of the war had been ten days – although this was to become more and more flexible as the War progressed - in areas near Rouen, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

When that rendezvous was effected it was late in the day of December 11 – which is likely why it is recorded in the Regimental War Diary as occurring 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.

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Those spared had marched on to Méricourt l'Abbé which is where the one-hundred seventy-three *other ranks* from Base Depot – Private Gilbert among that number - reported *to duty*. The newcomers were just in time for the six-week Christmas period to be spent well behind the lines in *Corps Reserve*, encamped near the city of Amiens.



(Right: a typical British Army Camp during a winter period somewhere in France – from a vintage post-card)

After that Christmas respite, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion *officially* returned to *active service* on January 23 of the New Year, 1917, although they had already been back in the trenches for several days and had suffered their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

The next five weeks were little different from those before Christmas: in and out of the trenches, the occasional dead, wounded and ill, and the occasional cold winter's day with its snow and ice - which did not seem to bother the Newfoundlanders.

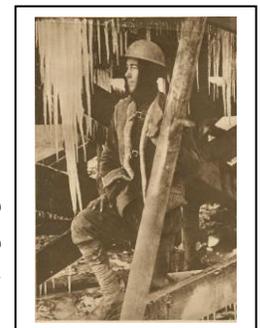
Anything was better than rain and mud.

The only infantry activity involving 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion during that entire period – from the action in mid-October of 1916 at Gueudecourt, 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 brought this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.



(Above 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(?))

(Right: A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers stands in the cold of the trenches at Sailly-Saillisel apparently enjoying a cigarette, during the late winter of 1916-1917, just prior to the arrival there of the Newfoundlanders who relieved them. – from *Illustration*)



On the penultimate day of the Newfoundlanders' involvement at Sailly-Saillisel, there was, in fact, little infantry action; that was to follow on the morrow. There was, of course, the incessant artillery. The Regimental War Diary reports... All our trenches were subjected to a heavy and accurate bombardment during the day... *2/lt Thomson and 1 O.R. reported missing. Other casualties, 4 killed, 13 wounded.*

The son of Albert Stephen Gilbert, fisherman, and Katherine (Kate) Gilbert (née *Snook*) – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay – he was native to Come-by-Chance, Placentia Bay.

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Private Gilbert was reported as having been *killed in action* on March 2, 1917, while serving with 'C' Company during the fighting at Sailly-Saillisel in the French *Département de la Somme*.

At home, it was the Reverend Scott Milley of Bay Bulls Arm who was requested to notify his family.

Sandy Gilbert had enlisted at twenty years and seven months of age.

(Right above: A *Calvaire* at a crossroads not far distant from Sailly-Saillisel is still a collecting point for munitions – to be seen against the base - ploughed up a century later. - photograph from 2007)

(Right. *The sacrifice of Private Gilbert is honoured on the Sunnyside (formerly Bay Bulls Arm) War Memorial* – photograph from 2014)

Private Alexander Gilbert was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

