



Private John Henry Hancock (Regimental Number 946) is believed to be interred in Y Ravine Cemetery – Grave reference: Special Memorial F. 6.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *fisherman* earning an annual four-hundred dollars, John Hancock 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 January 28 of the year 1915. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service.*

By that date, however, it would seem that he had already enlisted – engaged at the private soldier’s rate of a single dollar per diem plus a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance* three days before, on January 25 and also in St. John’s.

There now remained only for him to attest, but whereas attestation for others had come about on the day of their enlistment, John Hancock was now to wait a week plus a day after his medical assessment, until February 5, before *that* final formality would come to pass.

For Private Hancock, Number 946, there was now to be a further waiting period, this of six weeks. How he occupied himself during that time is not recorded among his papers; he may, of course, have temporarily returned to work or perhaps just travelled back to his home in Goose Cove - but this is only speculation.



(Right above: *The image of the Bowring Brothers’ vessel ‘Stephano’, sister-ship of ‘Florizel’, as she passes through ‘the Narrows’ of St. John’s Harbour is from the Provincial Archives.*)

Unlike the two previous contingents to have departed Newfoundland (see below) for...overseas service, Private Hancock’s ‘D’ Company was not to sail directly to the United Kingdom. On March 20, it embarked onto the Bowring-Brothers’ vessel *Stephano* for the short voyage to Halifax, capital city of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, where it was thereupon to board a second vessel, the newly-launched *Orduña* for the trans-Atlantic crossing*.



(Right above: *The image of Orduña is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The vessel was not to be requisitioned during the Great War but would be used by the Cunard Company to operate on its commercial service between Liverpool and New York.*)

Having then sailed from Nova Scotia on March 22 for Liverpool, Private Hancock and his draft landed there eight days later, on the 30th. Once disembarked in Liverpool, the two-hundred fifty men and officers of ‘D’ Company were thereupon transported on the same date by train directly to Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, to join the Newfoundland Regiment’s ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ Companies.

These units were by this time stationed at the historic Castle, ‘A’ and ‘B’ having recently been posted from Fort George and ‘C’ having arrived directly from home (see further below). After ‘D’ Company’s arrival at the end of that month of March, the Newfoundlanders were now to remain at Edinburgh for the following six weeks.

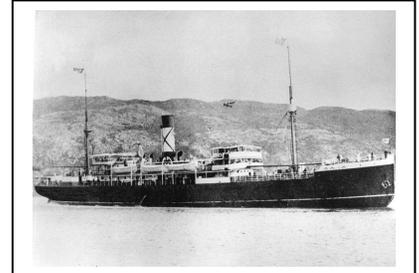


(Right above: *From its vantage point on Castle Hill, the venerable fortress overlooks the city of Edinburgh where in 1915 the Newfoundlanders were to provide the first garrison to be drawn from outside the British Isles. – photograph from 2011)*

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Five to six months 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 for the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits – these to become 'A' and 'B' Companies - during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after a recruit's 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 had sailed 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 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, as recorded beforehand, it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent* - would arrive directly from Newfoundland.

**This contingent, while a part of the Newfoundland Regiment, was not yet a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.*

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As seen in a previous paragraph, for the month of April and the first days of May of 1915, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies, now united, were to furnish the garrison – the first troops from outside the British Isles to do so - of the guardian of Scotland's capital city. Then, during the first week of May, 'E' Company was to report there...*to duty*...from home. Four days later again, on May 11, the Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

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On that day, three weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit was dispatched to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.

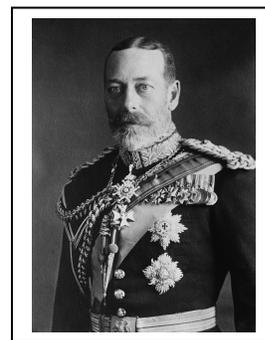
It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent would eventually receive the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland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

(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*)



**This was approximately fifteen hundred, sufficient to furnish two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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. This force, now 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, ‘E’ – last arrived at Edinburgh - and the aforementioned ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

(Right above: *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 while the Newfoundland Battalion was in training during those weeks at Aldershot, on August 15 that Private Hancock, according to his personal records, would be prevailed upon to enlist for the duration of the conflict. But, unlike the majority of his comrades-in-arms, he was not to be dispatched to the Middle East – at least, not immediately. Instead, he would be posted to the new Regimental Depot at Ayr.

**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 only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

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Some ten weeks previously, on May 6, 1915, while at Stob’s Camp, Private Hancock had been admitted into the 2nd Scottish General Hospital suffering from rheumatism. He was to

remain hospitalized until June 2 when he had been discharged but, while he was at Aldershot with 'D' Company, had it been felt that his convalescence was not far enough advanced for him to travel to the *Gallipoli Campaign* at that time?

No explanation is to be found in his documents but whatever the reason, Private Hancock, by the end of August of 1915, was to find himself in the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland's west coast where the Newfoundland Regimental Depot was in the throes of being established.

This was to be the overseas base for the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment 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*.

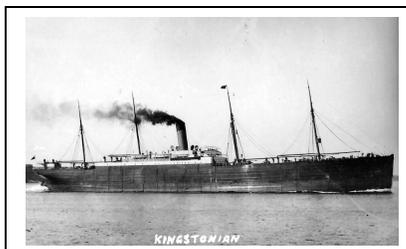
(Right: *An aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were billeted the 'other ranks', is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right. – by courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)



(Right below: *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*)



Private Hancock was now obliged to wait and to watch as others – the 1st Re-enforcement Draft of November 14 – departed on *active service*. It was not to be until March 13 of 1916 that he embarked at Devonport to join the 1st Battalion as one of the 2nd Reinforcement Draft of one-hundred forty *other ranks* from Ayr en route service in the Middle East.



However, three weeks later, by this circuitous route, the detachment arrived in the French Mediterranean port of Marseilles on board His Majesty's Transport *Kingstonian*, on April 3-4, to join - not the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force in Egypt but - the British Expeditionary Force in France*.

(Right above: *The image of 'Kingstonian' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

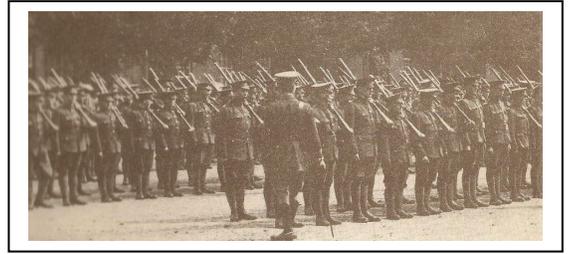
Four days later, on April 8, Private Hancock and the other personnel of that 2nd Draft from Ayr arrived by train from Marseilles with their re-enforcement draft to report to *duty* with the 1st Battalion in the village of Louvencourt, in the northern *Département de la Somme*.

**At the time there was some confusion as to whether the 1st Battalion would stay in the Middle East or not, and this draft had possibly already set sail for Egypt before the Newfoundland unit was ordered to France from Egypt. It may be their vessel had no wireless or it may be that some of the other units on board were needed in the Middle East, but no official reason for the confusion seems to have been documented.*

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In the mean-time, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had fought in the *Gallipoli Campaign*.

(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.*)



(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, 1915, the Newfoundland Battalion 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. 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: 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 Bay, and where the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to serve during the autumn of 1915 – photograph from 2011*)



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

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

(Right below: *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 of 1915 had seen perhaps the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes at Gallipoli; there was to be a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm 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 was to be the priority.

There had been 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.

During the days that had followed, the British positions at *Suvla Bay* were to become yet more and more untenable and thus on the night of December 19-20, the area had been abandoned – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.



(Right: *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*)

Some of the Battalion personnel were to be evacuated to the nearby island of Imbros, some to Lemnos, further away; but in neither case had the respite been of a long duration; the Newfoundland Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

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

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

This final operation had taken 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.*

(Right: *'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in 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 then on the morrow had been 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*)

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 begin the voyage up through the Suez Canal en route to France.

(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*)



The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles, on March 22.

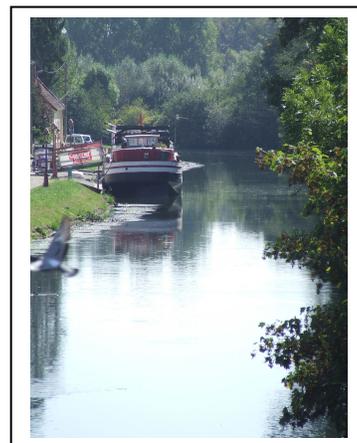
(Right: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles. – from a vintage post-card*)



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 have 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*.

It had been, of course, during that march towards the forward area that the 2nd Re-enforcement Draft with Private Hancock among its ranks, had reported to the parent unit in the community of Louvencourt.

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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.*



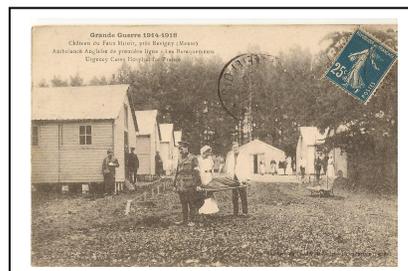
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(Preceding page: *A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?)*)

Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Mailly-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.

While the Newfoundlanders were serving in the trenches during the month of May, on the 26th, Private Hancock was admitted to 87th Field Ambulance with an undetermined complaint. Apparently it was none too serious as he returned...*to duty*...on the 30th.

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



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*.



(Right above: *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 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.*

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)



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*.

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It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage 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: *A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland - dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel – from...?)*

The son of Joseph Hancock, former fisherman, deceased June 30, 1906, and of Amelia Priddle Hancock (née *Pike*)* – by the time of her son’s enlistment she was Roebottom (also found as *Roebutton* and *Rowbottom*) of Goose Cove on the Treaty Shore – he cited having been born at Jamestown (*James Cove*), Bonavista Bay (see below), where there lived his only sibling, brother Richard.



**The couple had married on January 1 of 1893. After Joseph’s death, Amelia re-married on December 15, 1911, to Eli Rowbottom (spelling from marriage records). Eli’s son Frederick thus became step-brother to John and Richard.*

Private Hancock was reported to have been...*killed in action*...at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with ‘D’ Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*. It was the Reverend Chesley A. Francis of Goose Cove who was requested to bear the news to his family.

John Henry Hancock had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty or twenty-one years: date of birth at White Rock, Newfoundland, October 1, 1896 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register where is also found the name *Henry*).

He had allotted an allowance of 50 cents per day to his Aunt Lizzie Pike of 8, Pennywell Road, in St. John’s. His mother received his medals.

(Right: *Private Hancock’s sacrifice is honoured on the War Memorial near the Bonavista Bay community of Summerville.*)



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Private John Hancock 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 – February 8, 2023.