



Private George William Harris (Regimental Number 1321), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *fireman* – whether engaged in fighting fires or stoking them is not recorded – and earning a monthly seventy dollars, George William Harris enlisted at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on March 18, 1915. He was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar to which was to be added a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*.

Contrary to most recruits who underwent medical appraisal before enlistment, George Harris apparently did not present himself to be examined medically until two days afterwards, returning to the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month. It was to be a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*\*

*\*A second source has him attesting on the day of his enlistment.*

It was now to be a further eleven days, the date March 31, before he was to undertake his attestation, to swear his *Oath of Allegiance*, the concluding official formality. At that moment George William Harris became...*a soldier of the King*.

A period of three weeks plus another day then went by before, on April 22 of 1915, Private Harris, Number 1321, embarked in the harbour of St. John's for...*overseas service*...with the two-hundred forty-nine officers and...*other ranks*...of 'E' Company onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax.

There appear to be no details of how or where he may have spent that final three-week waiting-period before taking ship for...*overseas service*; Private Harris may have returned temporarily to work, or even perhaps to home at Humbermouth on the west coast of the island – but this is mere speculation.

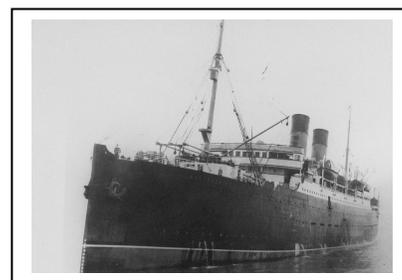
Having arrived in Halifax, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening the detachment began its trans-Atlantic passage on board the trans-Atlantic liner *SS Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool. The vessel arrived in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded although the second may well have been the date of disembarkation.



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

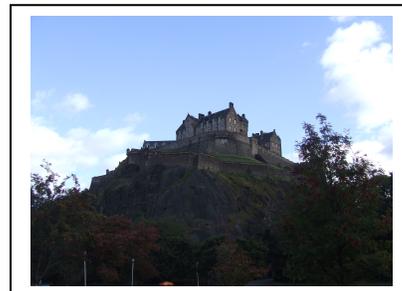
(Preceding page: *The image of 'Stephano' passing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is shown by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(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 as part of 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.

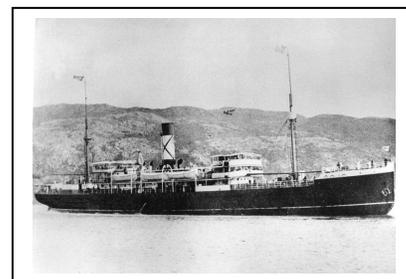
(Right: *The venerable bastion of Edinburgh Castle dominates the Scottish capital from its hill in the centre of the city. – photograph from 2011*)



Private Harris' 'E' Company, however, was to have but a few days to savour the charms of the Scottish capital.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some seven months before that May 4, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of 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.

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

The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.

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



Once having disembarked 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 of 1915, ‘C’ Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent\* - would arrive directly – through Liverpool of course - from Newfoundland. On the final day of the month of March it had been the turn of ‘D’ Company to arrive – they via Halifax as well as Liverpool – to report...*to duty*...at Edinburgh.

*\*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.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Seven days after the arrival of Private Harris’ ‘E’ Company in the Scottish capital, on May 11 the entire Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the 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\*. On that date the newly-formed 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thereupon available to be ordered on...*active service*.



(Right above: *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 four ‘fighting’ companies, 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 *Camp Aldershot*. This force, now the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



(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.)

Meanwhile the two junior Companies, 'E' – as seen, the 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 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion.

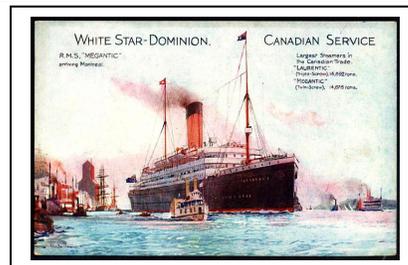
Private Harris, however, although having left Newfoundland as a soldier of 'E' Company, was not to be posted to the Regimental Depot but to southern England.

When he had been apprised of this change in plans seems not to be recorded – nor why he was selected - but Private Harris was one of the few from 'E' Company who were to swell the ranks of the units posted to Aldershot - thus he became a soldier of 'D' Company. And it was during the period while he was at Camp Aldershot, and as was the case with the great majority of the Newfoundland troops there, that Private Harris was prevailed upon to re-enlist...for the duration of the war. This he did on August 15\*.

*\*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 limited period of a single year. As the War progressed, however, this would likely cause problems and they were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.*



(Right above: Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.)

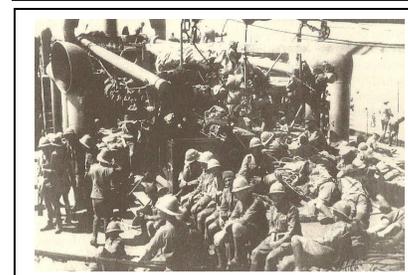


(Right above: The image of Megantic, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

On August 20, 1915, Private Harris and his 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to land at Suvla Bay on the Gallipoli Peninsula.



(Right above: Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the Newfoundland Battalion 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)



(continued)

**(Preceding page: 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)**

**When the Newfoundlanders had landed 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.**



**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:**

**(Right above: An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from Provincial Archives)**

**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 their allies, the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only Suvla Bay but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.**



**(Right above: No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – 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.**

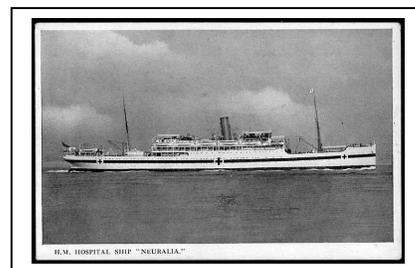
**(Right: This is Anzac Bay in the fore-ground with the Salt Lake in the centre further away. The bottom of Suvla Bay is just to be seen on the left and adjacent to the Salt Lake, and further away again. The hills in the distance and the ones from which this photograph was taken were held by the Turks and formed a horse-shoe around the plain surrounding the Salt Lake - which was where the British and Newfoundlanders were stationed. – photograph from 2011)**



\* \* \* \* \*

**(continued)**

On October 10, having set foot on the sand and rock – mostly the latter – of *Kangaroo Beach* less than four weeks earlier, Private Harris was evacuated from the Newfoundland positions at *Suvla Bay* to be taken on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Neuralia* and transferred to Egypt for medical attention.



(Right above: *The image of HMHS 'Neuralia' clad in the wartime garb of a hospital ship is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. A new ship, launched and completed for the British India Steam Navigation Company in 1912, she was requisitioned for war service in June of 1915, as a hospital ship she could – and did – accommodate six-hundred thirty sick and wounded. Used in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean before ending the Great War in the waters around Great Britain, she was returned to her owners in 1919. 'Neuralia' also was to serve during the Second World War as a transport-ship and was to be sunk in Taranto harbour by a mine on May 1, 1945, seven days before the end of the War in Europe.*)

On October 15 Private Harris was admitted into the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Stationary Hospital established at the British *Abbassia Barracks* in the vicinity of Cairo. Having been treated for what appears to have been a severe case of diarrhoea, he was...*released to duty*...at the British Base Depot in Alexandria on November 17 – the problem still un-diagnosed.

There he was to remain for a further ten weeks until January 26 of the New Year, 1916, before re-joining his unit. By that time the Newfoundland Battalion had been withdrawn from the *Gallipoli Peninsula* to be encamped at Port Suez and Private Harris must have travelled from North to South down the length of the Canal of that name in order to report back...*to duty*.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the first weeks of Private Harris' absence from the Newfoundland unit, the occupation of the *Suvla Plain* by the British had reached an impasse. November 26 would see 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 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, were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

By this time the situation there was daily becoming more and more untenable, thus on the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the entire 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Hellen*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

**(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)**



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

**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.**



**(Right: 'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – 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: '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 evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula, the Newfoundland unit had been ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria. On January 14, the Australian Expeditionary Force Transport Nestor had arrived there with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on board. The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16<sup>th</sup>, on its way southwards down the Suez Canal to Port Suez where she arrived on the morrow and where the Newfoundlanders landed and marched to their encampment.**



**There they were to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division had yet to be decided\*.**

**(Right above: The image of the Blue Funnel Line vessel Nestor is from the Shipspotting.com web-site. The vessel was launched and fitted in 1912-1913 and was to serve much of her commercial life until 1950 plying the routes between Britain and Australia. During the Great War she served mainly in the transport of Australian troops and was requisitioned once again in 1940 for government service in the Second World War. In 1950 she was broken up.)**

**(continued)**

***\*Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was already becoming a theatre of war.***

**(Right: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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)***



**And it was, of course, during this period that Private Harris also made the journey down the Suez Canal, to re-join the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on January 26.**

\* \* \* \* \*

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

**After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were to board His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage back up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseille, on March 22.**



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

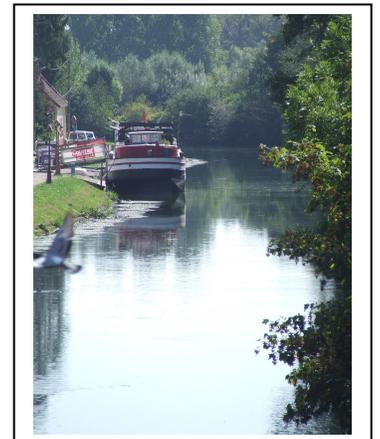
**Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably 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 had 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had 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 to then be 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 below: *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.



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.*



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

The only son of John Harris, *labourer* and *mill-hand* – to whom he allotted a daily allowance of sixty cents from his pay – and of Leah Harris (née *Penny\**, deceased December 29, 1906, in childbirth with Jeanette) of Humbermouth (formerly Riverhead), Bay of Islands, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Florence-Marion, to Olive, to Louisa, to Lavinia (died young) and to Jeanette.

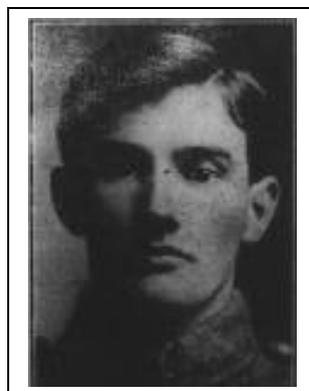


His father having re-married, to Rachel Robertson, on April 20, 1911, George William subsequently became step-brother to Lydia (died young), to Ursula and to Doreen.

*\*The couple had married in Corner Brook on November 21, 1891.*

Private Harris was reported as having been...*killed in action*...at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1 of 1916, while serving with ‘D’ Company during the fighting of the first day of the...*First Battle of the Somme*.

(Right: *The photograph of Private George William Harris from the Decemehr 24, 1917, edition of the Western Star has been made available to the public by Memorial University.*)



George William Harris had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-one years of age: date of birth at Humbermouth, Bay of Islands, Newfoundland, May 23, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

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**Private George William Harris 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).**



**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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 22, 2023.**