



Private John Joseph Johnson (Regimental Number 135), 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 *labourer* with the *Baine Johnson Company* of St. John's, and earning \$10.00 per week, John Joseph Johnson enlisted in St. John's - at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 (including a daily ten-cent field allowance) - on September 3, 1914, during the First Draft.

Having attested at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in the capital city on October 2, he embarked on the morrow, October 3, onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel*. The ship sailed on the following day to its rendezvous off the south coast of the Island with the convoy transporting the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas.



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

In the United Kingdom Private Johnson trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England, then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness -, at Edinburgh Castle – where the unit provided the first garrison from outside the British Isles - and later again at *Stobs Camp* near to the town of Hawick - during which period Private Johnson was treated in hospital for venereal disease from July 7 to 26.



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

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp, Scotland, to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915 – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



(continued)

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies\*, 'A' – Private Johnson among its numbers - 'B', 'C' and 'D', were then sent south to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot; meanwhile the two junior Companies, 'E' and 'F', were sent to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, where they were to form the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion.

(Right below: *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* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)

*\*On July 10, 1915, 'F' Company had arrived at Stobs Camp from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, comprising the four senior Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', was thereupon attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.*



It was apparently to be during that final period of training spent at Aldershot that Private Johnson – and not only he - had been prevailed upon, he on August 14, to re-enlist in the Newfoundland unit...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 only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*



(Right above: *Some of the men of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Aldershot in August of 1915* – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)



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

Private Johnson was to serve as a soldier in the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force during the *Gallipoli Campaign*. On August 20, 1915, he embarked onto the requisitioned passenger liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and the fighting against the Turks where, a month later, on September 20 – having spent two weeks in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo – the Newfoundland Battalion landed at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Kangaroo Beach, where the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is 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: If it was Megantic, then Private Johnson was still on board ship (see below). – from Provincial Archives*)



(Right: *A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where Private Johnson was to serve for the last eight weeks of the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011*)

Private Johnson, however, was not to land at Suvla until the end of October, having been hospitalized from September 9 to 22 at the *Abbassia Barracks* in Cairo, there to receive further treatment for his venereal problem.

He was eventually discharged *to duty* back at the Divisional Base Depot in the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria on this latter date\*. Private Johnson finally embarked for Suvla from there for passage to Suvla Bay on October 25.

*\*There seem to exist certain contradictions in Private Johnson's records: however, the above seems to be the most credible interpretation of events.*



\* \* \* \* \*

In the meantime, during Private Johnson's absence, the Newfoundland Battalion had begun to serve at *Suvla Bay*. It was to be a miserable existence in the trenches and would be no more successful from a military point of view – and the situation was not to get any better once Private Johnson arrived to serve with his unit.

Flies, dust, disease, frost-bite, floods – and 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 it would be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

*\*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.*

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On the night of December 19-20, the British forces abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* where the Newfoundland Battalion, the only non-British unit to have served there, was to form a part of the rear-guard. Some of the Battalion personnel was then 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 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 and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps also served at *Gallipoli* – was then only to be marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken. The operation was eventually to take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to provide some of the rear-guard for this second retirement as well\*.



\**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 above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was days before the final British evacuation – from Illustration*)



(Right: *'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces and by the Newfoundlanders who were the last soldiers off the beach: vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

(Right: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were among the last to leave on two occasions, at Suvla Bay and at Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis from Illustration*)



When the British finally evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was thereupon sent to *Alexandria*, to arrive there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month. The Newfoundland unit was then immediately transferred southward to *Suez*, one of the ports 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 Battalion's 29<sup>th</sup> Division had not yet been decided\*.



***\*Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.***

**(Preceding page: *The centre of Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal at a time just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)**

**On March 14, the Newfoundlanders embarked through Port Tewfiq, also at the southern end of the *Suez Canal*, onto HM Transport *Alaunia*\* for passage to the French port of Marseilles, and disembarked there on March 22, en route to the *Western Front*.**



***\*Private Johnson was awarded two days of Field Punishment Number 1 for...‘coming on board HMT Alaunia drunk at 3.15 pm...on March 14’, the day of departure.***

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

**Some three days after the unit’s disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion’s train arrived at the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold and miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having travelled unused in a separate wagon. De-training at the local station at two in the morning, the Newfoundlanders still had a long march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l’Abbé.**

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

**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 passed on their way from the station. Some three months later *the Somme* would become a part of their history.**



**During the time of the Newfoundland Battalion’s march from Pont-Rémy towards the area of the *Western Front*, Private Johnson was admitted for attention for an unspecified medical complaint at the beginning of April. He was first ordered to the 88<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance attached to the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, and then to the 4<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station established at Beauval.**

**During this episode which lasted but three days altogether – from April 4 to 6 inclusive before Private Johnson’s return to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - the Newfoundlanders were billeted in the small village of Louvencourt, there to rest before being once more on their way – on foot – to the forward area.**



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

(Right below: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)

On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion marched into the forward area and the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive re-enforcements and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the trenches of the *Western Front*.



The Newfoundlanders would also soon be preparing for the upcoming British campaign of that summer of 1916, this to be fought on the ground named for the meandering river they had crossed some weeks before: *the Somme*.

While serving with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion during its first tour of duty in the trenches – this from April 22 to May 2 – Private Johnson suffered a slight scalp wound inflicted by flying shrapnel on April 29; however, he...*remained on duty*. The single entry of the Regimental War Diary of the day simply mentions...*One man wounded*.

(Right below: A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))

If there is one name and one 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\*.



*\*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, perhaps just as depressing, the killing of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.



(Right above: 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: *Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village. – photographs from 2010 & 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.*



The son of Andrew Johnson, fisherman, and of Mary Johnson (née *Fahey*)\* of 45, LeMarchant Road in St. John's – he was brother of Phillip and of James as well as of sisters Charlotte, Mary-Joseph and Sarah.

*\*The couple was married on January 11 of 1886 in Harbour Grace.*

(Right: *This crumbling memorial stone, to be found in Section F of the Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery, commemorates and honours the sacrifice of Private John Joseph Johnson – photograph from 2022, with thanks for same to my wife, Claire*)



Private Johnson was reported as having been *killed in action* on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'A' Company during the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel on the first day of *the Somme*.

John Joseph Johnson had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-one years of age: date of birth (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) July 30, 1893.



(Far right: *a grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after the action at Beaumont-Hamel – from...*)



(*The photograph of Private Johnson is from the Provincial Archives*)

Private John Joseph Johnson was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and 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 19, 2023.