



Private Donald Fraser McNeill (also found preponderantly as *McNeil* – but he signed his few papers as *McNeill* as did his mother – and as is found on the family gravestones) (Regimental Number 411) is buried in Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension Number 1 – Grave reference III. C. 2.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *watchmaker* with *Charles D. Sleater, Watchmaker & Jeweller* of Water Street, and earning a weekly eight dollars, Donald Fraser McNeill presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on September 4 of 1914 – just four weeks and three days after the *Declaration of War* – for a medical examination. It was an exercise which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

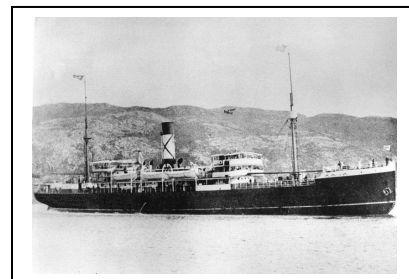
Four days following that medical examination, on September 8, Donald McNeill returned to the *C.L.B. Armoury*, on this second occasion for enlistment, whereupon he was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*. A recruit of the First Draft, 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 McNeill 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 McNeill 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.



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.



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

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 McNeill 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 13 Private McNeill was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion for the *duration of the war**.

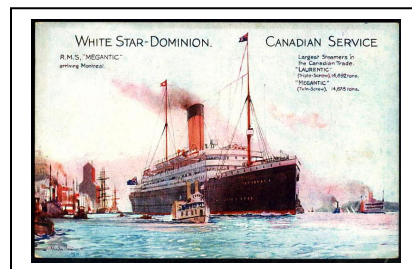
**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was likely to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

(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 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.*)

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.

(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 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 was to be the priority.

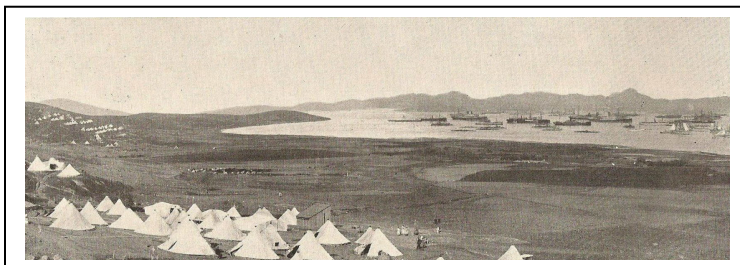


There were to be many casualties on both sides, some of them, surprised by the sudden inundation of their positions, fatalities who had drowned in their trenches – although no Newfoundlanders were to be among that number. Numerous, however, were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

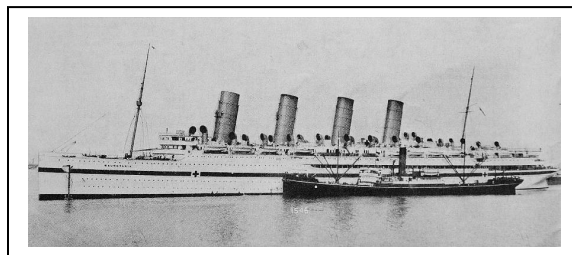
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Private McNeill was among the many casualties of that day and admitted into the 54th Casualty Clearing Station at Suvla Bay suffering from frostbite and trench-foot, the left foot being particularly affected.

(Right: Some of the many French and British – including Commonwealth - medical facilities at Mudros – the majority of which were under canvas - which, by late 1915, almost completely encircled the bay and its minuscule harbour – from Illustration)



Four days later, on the 30th, he was evacuated for further treatment from Suvla Bay to the 15th Stationary Hospital at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos. Only three days later again, on December 3, Private McNeill was embarked onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Mauretania* for passage back to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: The photograph of Mauretania in her war-time hospital-ship garb, possibly during sea-trials - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. During the war the vessel was to also serve as a troop-transport, particularly on the trans-Atlantic run. She survived the conflict and returned to commercial service in September of 1919.)

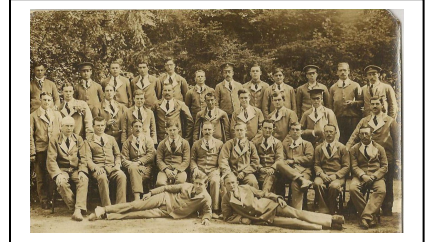
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On or about December 11 of that 1915, HMHS *Mauretania* arrived back in England and Private McNeill was immediately transferred from the vessel to and admitted into the 3rd London General Hospital in the Borough of Wandsworth. There he was now to remain for some six weeks.

(Right: *The main building of what was to become the 3rd London General Hospital during the Great War had originally been opened on July 1st, 1859, as a home for the orphaned daughters of British soldiers, sailors and marines. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *A party of Newfoundland patients dressed in hospital uniform, here seen convalescing in the grounds of the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



Discharged from Wandsworth on January 24 of the New Year, 1916, Private McNeill was granted the customary ten-day furlough accorded to military personnel released from hospital. He spent this time in Edinburgh, staying at the *Waverley Hotel* on Princes Street just below the Castle.

(Right: *The Waverly Hotel, Edinburgh; It was a favourite spot with the troops for whom there was a special rate during the Great War at all the company's hotels. – the photograph is from Wikipedia*)



At the conclusion of his furlough, the almost-inevitable posting to the Regimental Depot at Ayr then came to pass and Private McNeill reported there *to duty* on February 2, 1916.

At the end of the summer of 1915, the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland's west coast was to begin to serve as the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment from where – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts from home 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 above: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were quartered 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: *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.*



Some eight weeks later, on March 28 of 1916, the 3rd Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr – Private McNeill among its ranks - embarked in the English south-coast port of Southampton onto His Majesty's Transport *Archangel* for the short voyage across the English Channel to the Norman capital city of Rouen.

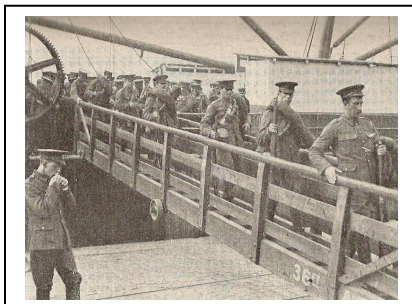
There Private McNeill disembarked on the 30th before proceeding to the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot nearby. There the detachment underwent final training and organization* before moving on to its rendezvous with the parent unit.

(Right: *The photograph of a troop-laden Archangel is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Renamed from Petersburg in 1916, she served as a troop-transport throughout the Great War which she survived. Requisitioned once more during the Second World War, she was less fortunate: in May of 1941, damaged by the Luftwaffe with a loss of forty-four lives, she was beached but later broke into four pieces.*)



(Right: *British troops disembark at Rouen en route 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, Étaples, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*



A draft of two officers and two-hundred eleven other ranks – Private McNeill almost certainly among that number - from Rouen reported to duty with the Newfoundland Battalion on April 15 in the village of Englebelmer, just three kilometres behind the front lines of the Western Front in the *Département de la Somme*.

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In the meantime, just more than three weeks after Private McNeill's departure for medical attention, 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 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 1st Battalion was to 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 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 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 were then to be 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*.



(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*)

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

(Right: *Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal as it was 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 1st Battalion 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.

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

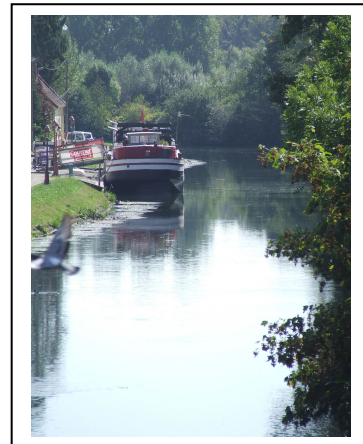
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably 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 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 below: *A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)



On April 13, the 1st 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*.

The above-mentioned re-enforcements from Rouen who arrived on April 15 were likely to have included Private McNeill who thus reported back *to duty* with the Newfoundland unit.

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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 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 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: *Two views of parts of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photographs from 2009(?) and 2010*)



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.*

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 butchery of *the Somme* was to 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.



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

On July 1, 1916, during the first day of the fighting of the Somme, Private McNeill was wounded at Beaumont-Hamel while serving with 'A' Company. He incurred *gun-shot wounds* – from artillery fire - to the abdomen and was evacuated to the 87th Field Ambulance. On the following day, July 2, he was transferred behind the lines to the 19th Casualty Clearing Station at Beauval.



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

The son of James McNeill (former wheel-wright, deceased in an accident on December 3, 1901) and of Fannie (Frances) McNeill (née *Newhook?*)* of McNeil Street in St. John's, he was apparently one of nine siblings: Helen-Isabel; Kenneth-Malcolm; Hector; Harvey-Furneaux - Private, Regimental Number 2850, serving in France by December, 1916, wounded at Monchy-le-Preux, demobilized in 1918; Samuel-John and Charles-George.

**If this is so, the couple married on May 5, 1881.*

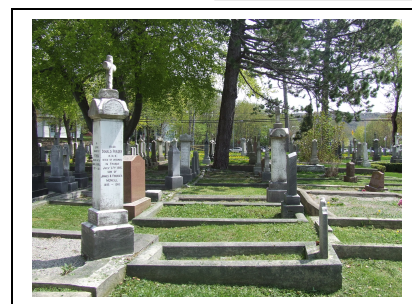
Private McNeill was reported as having *died of wounds* on July 6, 1916, while still in the care of the 19th CCS and was buried on that same day by the Reverend A.K. Finnomore, attached to the same CCS. At home, it was the Reverend W.E.R. Cracknell who was requested to bear the news to his family.



Donald Fraser McNeill had enlisted at a declared nineteen years of age: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, February 1, 1895 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

(The above photograph of Private McNeill is from the Provincial Archives)

(Right: *A family memorial – the stele to the left – in the Old Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road, commemorates the sacrifice of Private McNeill. – photograph from 2015*)



Private Donald Fraser McNeill 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 16, 2023.