

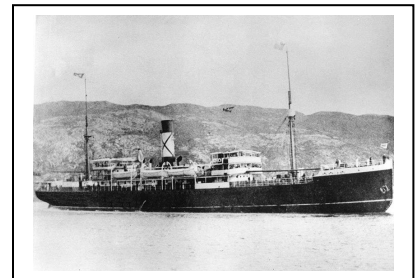
Private William Robert McNiven (Regimental Number 279), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



His occupation previous to enlistment recorded as that of a *shoe-cutter* – likely with *Parker and Monroe* of Water Street, St. John's, where his father (had?) worked - for a weekly wage of seven dollars and fifty cents, William Robert McNiven presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury*, again in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on September 1, 1914. It was a procedure which was to find him...*fit for foreign service*.

Six days later, on September 7, he then enlisted, also at the *CLB Armoury* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 (this was to include a ten-cent Field Allowance). William Robert McNiven was a recruit of the First Draft.

Following a waiting-period of more than three weeks – although training was to be ongoing – Private McNiven was to attest on October 1 and then, following two further days, was to embark on October 3 with the others of the *First Five Hundred* onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting the contingent 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 sailed on the morrow to its rendezvous off the south coast of the Island where she was to join the convoy transporting the 1st Canadian Division across the Atlantic.

In the United Kingdom Private McNiven 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 it provided the first garrison from outside the British Isles; and later again at the tented *Stobs Camp* near the town of Hawick to the south-east of Edinburgh.

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

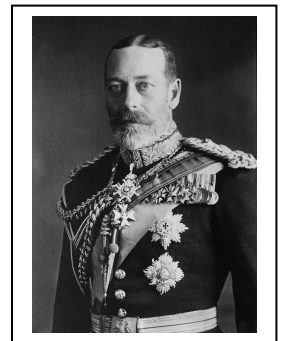


(Right below: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915* – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', were then ordered south to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot; meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived 'E' and 'F', were sent to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.



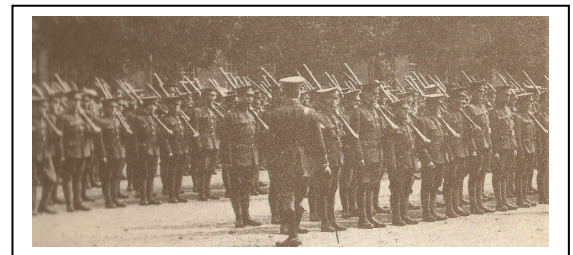
(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – photograph from Bain News Services via Wikipedia)



**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 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.*

It had then been during that period spent at Aldershot that Private McNiven of 'A' Company* – he was not alone in doing so - had been prevailed upon, he on August 14, to re-enlist for the duration of the war**.

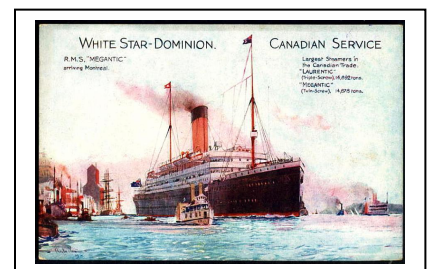
***At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*



(Right above: *Some of the men of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment 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.)*

On August 20, 1915, Private McNiven and his comrades-in-arms 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.



(continued)

There, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment disembarked 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*)



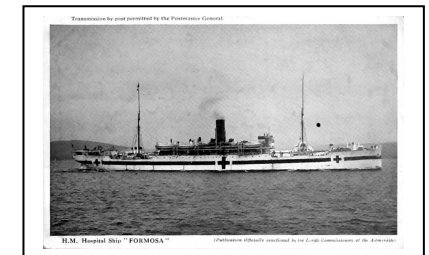
Private McNiven, however, would hardly place his foot upon the sands of *Suvla Bay* before, for medical reasons, he was to be shipped away from the place.

(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 was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011*)



* * * * *

Barely more than a week after having landed there, on September 28, Private McNiven was evacuated from *Suvla Bay* – perhaps via *Mudros Bay* on the Greek island of Lemnos - on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Formosa* to be hospitalized at the 15th General Hospital in the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria on October 2. He was suffering from chronic diarrhoea – but no further details appear in his papers.



(Right above: *The image of HM Hospital Ship *Formosa*, seen here in her war-time garb, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. A French ship, she served in this capacity from June of 1915 until July of 1919.*)

From the 15th General Hospital he was discharged on November 12 to Montazah Convalescent Hospital - a palace on the coast near Alexandria which had been loaned to the British by the Sultan for the duration of the conflict - thence to the British Base Depot of Sidi Bishr, also in Alexandria, a month later, on December 16. It was from there that Private McNiven later travelled to Suez where he reported to duty with the 1st Battalion on January 26 of the New Year, 1916.



(Preceding page: *One of the main thoroughfares in the city of Alexandria at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

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In the meantime, during the first three months of Private McNiven's absence from his unit due to those medical problems, the operation at *Suvla Bay*, and indeed the entire *Gallipoli Campaign* itself had proved to be much of a debacle: Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the afore-mentioned 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 finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

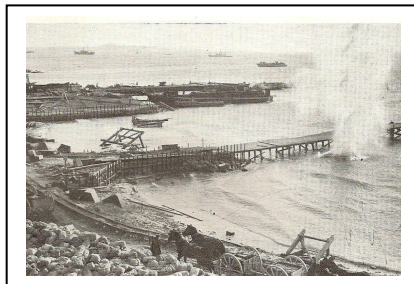
**Many of the commanders chosen were second-rate, had been brought out of retirement, and had little idea of how to fight – let alone of how to win. One of the generals at Suvla, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.*

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 and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* was undertaken. The operation would take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion providing part of the rear-guard on this second occasion also.



(Right above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was 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 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 below: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1st 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 had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city Alexandria, having arrived there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders as, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.

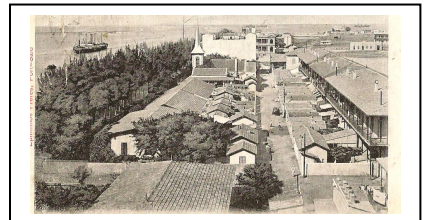


And, as seen above, it had been early during this period to be spent at Suez that Private McNiven was to report back *to duty*, on January 26, with the Newfoundland Battalion.

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

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After a two-month interim, on March 14, the Newfoundlanders embarked through Port Tewfiq, also at the southern end of the *Suez Canal*, for the French port of Marseilles, where the 1st Battalion would land on March 22, en route to the *Western Front*.



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

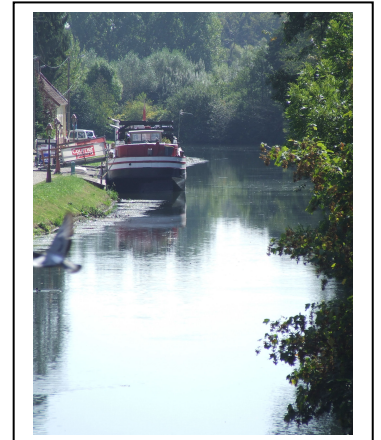
(Right: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles. – from a vintage postcard*)



(Right below: *A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)

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

It is doubtful that any of those tired soldiers were to pay much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they had passed on their way from the station. But in three months' time *the Somme* would be a part of their history.



On April 13, the Newfoundland Battalion had entered into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy – where it was billeted, received reinforcements and, after two days' time, would be introduced into the British lines of the *Western Front*, there to be immediately put to work to improve the condition of the nearby communication trenches.



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

Only days later again, two of the four Companies – 'A', that of Private McNiven, and 'B' – were to take over some support positions from a British unit* before the entire Newfoundland unit was ordered to move up 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 the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles. This was also true on the day of the attack on July 1.*

For the remainder of the spring of 1916, the Newfoundlanders were to be preparing for the British campaign of that upcoming summer, the battles to be fought on the ground named for the innocuous, meandering river flowing through the region, and over which the parent unit of the 1st Battalion had marched only weeks previously at Pont-Rémy: *the Somme*.

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*.

**Perhaps ironically, the majority of the Battalion's casualties was sustained while advancing 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: *Beaumont-Hamel* is a commune, not a village (see below). – 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.

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 would prove to be the biggest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps worse, it was to continue for the next four and a half months.

The son of Frederick McNiven (the 1904 Business Directory spells it as *McNevin*) of Halifax, Nova Scotia, shoemaker, working for *Parker & Munroe*, and Rosanna (also found as *Rosann*) McNiven (née *Bryan*) of Portugal Cove Road (also found as 40, Angel Place, and by 1921, 48 Freshwater Road, both in St. John's)* - his own address recorded on his papers as 24, Springdale Street - he was also younger brother to Frederick James.



**The couple was married in St. John's on December 31, 1897.*

(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 from 2009*)



Private McNiven was reported as *missing in action* on July 1, 1916, at Beaumont-Hamel while serving with 'A' Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*. Some six months later, on December 31, 1916, for official purposes he was *presumed dead**.

**A single entry records 'killed in action', but there seems to be no authority for this among his other documents.*

William Robert McNiven had enlisted at the age of nineteen years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, September 29, 1894 (from Newfoundland Birth Register).



(Right above: *A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after the action at Beaumont-Hamel – from...*)

(The photograph of Private McNiven is from the Provincial Archives.)

Private William Robert McNiven 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 – February 12, 2023.