



Private Chesley Mercer (Regimental Number 1303) is interred in Earlsfield (*Wandsworth*) Cemetery – Grave reference: Nfld. 768.

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of *newsagent* and *steward* (train or ship?) earning twenty-two dollars and fifty cents per month, Chesley Mercer presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on March 20 of 1915. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

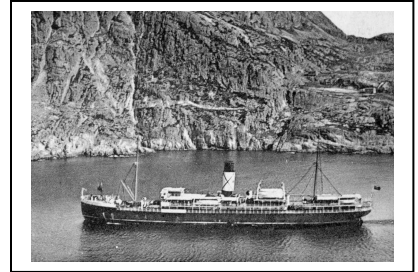
Chesley Mercer was to return to the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road on March 22, two days following his medical assessment, on this second occasion to enlist. He was thereupon engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar to which was added a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*.

It was to be a further eight days, the date March 30, before he was to undertake his attestation, to swear his *Oath of Allegiance*, the concluding official formality. At that moment Chesley Mercer became...*a soldier of the King*.

There now passed a further lengthy period of three weeks and two days before, on April 22 of 1915, Private Mercer, Number 1303, 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 waiting-period before taking ship for...overseas service; Private Mercer may have returned temporarily to work – 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*.

(Right above: *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*)

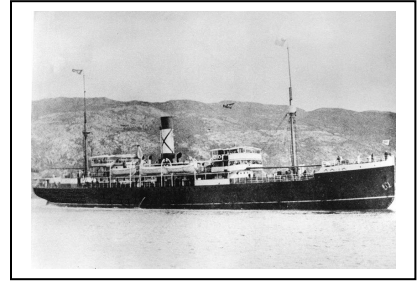


Private Mercer's 'E' Company, however, was to have but a few days to savour the charms of the Scottish capital.

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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: *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 1st 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.*

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Seven days after the arrival of Private Mercer's '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.

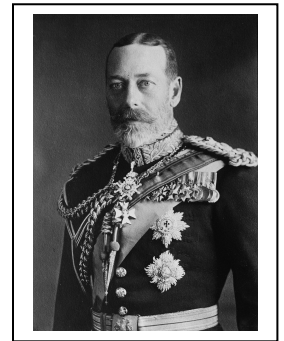
It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent would eventually receive the re-enforcements from home – 'F' Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. On that date the newly-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thereupon available to be ordered on...*active service*.



(Preceding page: *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 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



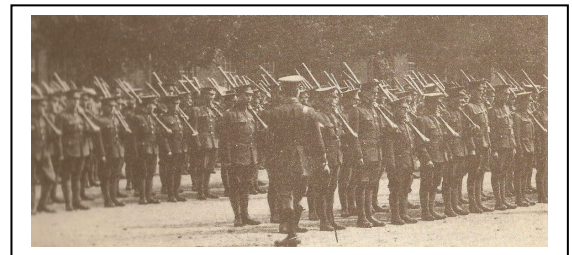
(Right above: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – the photograph is from Bain News Services via the Wikipedia web-site.*)

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 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

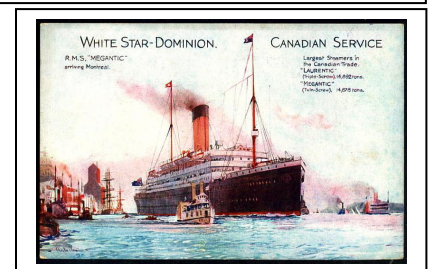
Private Mercer, however, although having left Newfoundland as a soldier of 'E' Company, was not to be posted to the Regimental Depot but to southern England.

When he had been apprised of this change in plans seems not to be recorded – nor why he was selected - but Private Mercer 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 Mercer 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 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)

(Preceding page: *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 Mercer and his 1st 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 1st 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*)

(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 below: *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*)



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It was reportedly on the date of his disembarkation – three o'clock in the morning - at *Suvla Bay*, on September 20, that Private Mercer was wounded in the right shoulder by Turkish artillery fire and was admitted into the 26th Casualty Clearing Station.

The following excerpt from the diary of Lieutenant Owen William Steele recounts the incident: *September 20th /15 ...Got up at 6 a.m. having had 2 hrs. sleep. We were shelled by the Turks for an hour from 8 to 9 a.m. from a distance of 7 or 8 miles. We had some 14 casualties... Fortunately no one was killed...*

(Right: *Turkish artillery still stands guard at Suvla Bay to this day. – photograph from 2011*)



From there – or perhaps via Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos – Private Mercer was evacuated on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Assaye* to the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta where he was hospitalized on September 26.

(Right below: *The image of 'Assaye' – likely shown in peace-time – is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The vessel was built in 1899 and was intended for use by its owners, the P&O Company, as a passenger and cargo ship. In fact, from the time of her launching until the onset of the Great War she was almost constantly chartered to serve as a troop-ship. In August of 1914, the British government took her over and after further use as a troop-carrier, 'Assaye' was converted to be hospital ship with a capacity for some four-hundred fifty sick and wounded. For the ten years which followed the Great War, she continued to serve in both capacities until she sailed to demolition in May of 1928.)*

(Right below: *British medical facilities still stand today – 2011 – disused and abandoned since the independence of the island of Malta in 1964. – photograph from 2011)*

Apparently Private Mercer was well enough to be reported as...*fit for duty*...and to be sent to Egypt with a detachment of some thirty soldiers discharged from hospital on board His Majesty's Transport *Karoa* on October 6. But only just more than three weeks afterwards he was taken on board another hospital ship – the *Re d'Italia* on October 29 – for the voyage back to the United Kingdom, apparently during that intermission having developed further – and also worrying - symptoms.

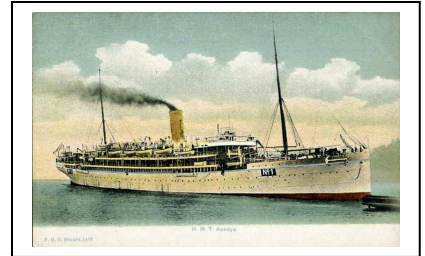
Upon his arrival in England on November 12, Private Mercer was immediately transported to and admitted into the 3rd London General Hospital in the Borough of Wandsworth, having by that time been diagnosed as suffering from the onset of lymphoma (Hodgkin's disease).

On the 14th day of November, 1915, he was reported as being *dangerously ill*.

(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 of 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 but otherwise unfortunately unidentified, is seen here convalescing in the grounds of the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth – courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)*

The son of John Mercer, cooper with A. Goodridge & Sons but by 1921 self-employed, and of Emma Mercer (née *Morris*)* – to whom he had allotted a daily allowance of sixty cents from his pay - of 48, Spencer Street in St. John's, he was also brother Frederick, Elijah(?), Sophia, Vivia, Edith and Mary.



**The couple was married on November 16, 1893.*

Private Mercer was reported as having...*died of sickness*...on the morning of November 14, 1915, in hospital, from disease (a second source has an unlikely...*died of wounds*) contracted during the *Gallipoli Campaign*.

William Chesley Mercer had enlisted at the *declared* age of nineteen years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, January 24, 1897 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register, as is the name *William*).

(Right above: *The Newfoundland Plot at Earlsfield (Magdalen Road) Cemetery* – photograph from 2010)

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

Private Chesley Mercer 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).



Funeral charges

**To: Command Paymaster
Easter Command
91 York Street
Westminster S.W.**

I enclose bill, T. Vigers, £2.6.0., for payment please.

It may be mentioned that this was forwarded to this office Canadian Contingent, where it had been sent in error, the Newfoundland Contingent being distinct and in no way controlled by Canada.

**Sgd. Capt.
Paymaster & O. i/c records**

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 6, 2023.