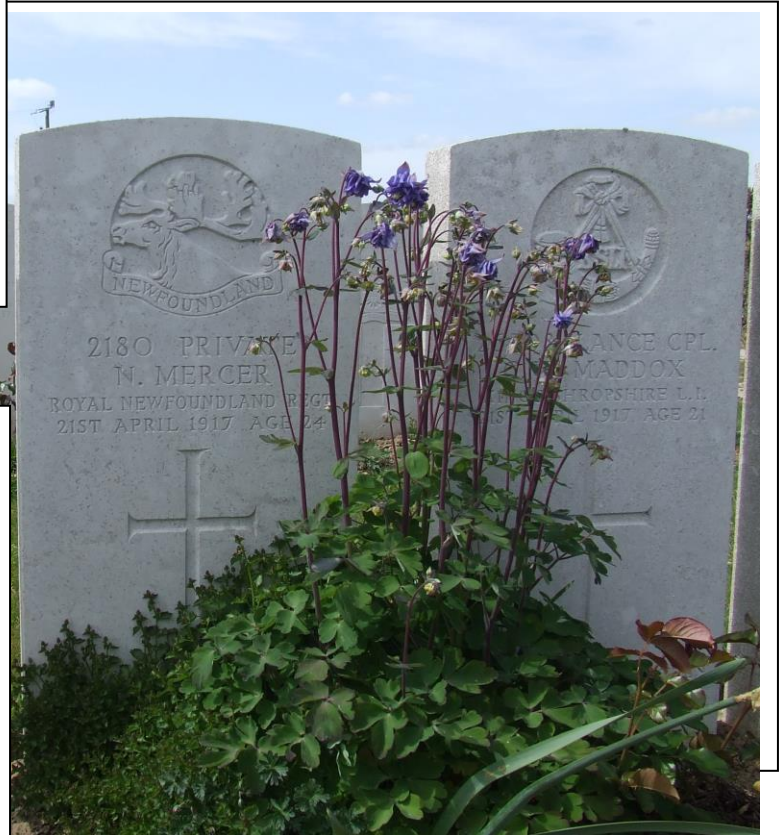




413 ABLE SEAMAN  
J. BURTON RNVR.



**Private Nathan Mercer (Regimental Number 2180) is buried in Duisans British Cemetery: Grave reference, II. P. 4.**

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *fisherman*, Nathan Mercer was a volunteer of the Eighth Re-enforcement Draft. He presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on February 21, 1916, for a medical examination. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as being...*fit for Foreign Service*.

It was then to be on the same day, February 21, perhaps only hours following that medical assessment and at the same venue, the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, that he was also to enlist. Nathan Mercer was thereupon engaged...*For the Duration of the War\**...at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar, to which was to be added a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

(continued)

*\*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. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.*

A full week was now to pass before there then came the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the 28<sup>th</sup> day of February, 1916, he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, Nathan Mercer became...*a soldier of the King.*

Private Mercer, Number 2180, would not sail to the United Kingdom until a further three weeks and four days had then elapsed. What the reasons might have been for this delay, or how he was to spend the lengthy waiting-period after his attestation, appear not to have been documented. It may therefore be that he continued to work temporarily and was perhaps to spend time with friends and family at his home in the Conception Bay community of Upper Island Cove – but of course, these conclusions are a little bit speculative and it may also have been decided that he remain in the capital city\*.

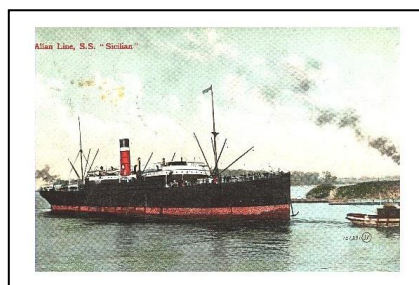
*\*A certain number of the recruits at this time, those whose home was not in St. John's or close to the city, or those who had no friends or family to offer board and lodging – or for perhaps other reasons - were to be quartered in the curling rink at Fort William in St. John's, a building which was to serve as a barracks.*

When he eventually took ship it was as a private soldier of the second contingent of 'H' Company that he embarked for...overseas service...onto the SS *Sicilian* in St. John's Harbour on March 23-24, 1916. The vessel did not sail from Newfoundland until the morrow, the 25<sup>th</sup>, to reach the United Kingdom some two weeks later - a slow crossing\*.

*\*It was surely not because she was in a slow-moving convoy as this system did not come into being until 1917. The fact that she was carrying a large quantity of fish from St. John, New Brunswick - and had sailed from there on March 18 - to supply the needs on the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the United Kingdom was likely not a factor either.*

For whatever the reason – perhaps the annual spring ice had been a problem - it was nevertheless a slower than normal voyage: the date of disembarkation – although the port is not named - and the date of the contingent's arrival at the Regimental Depot in Scotland are both recorded as being the same April 9.

(Right: The image of 'Sicilian' is from the Old ship Picture Galleries web-site. Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel, originally built for the Allan Line, had been requisitioned as a troop-ship and transport carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War. It seems that during the Great War, even though she was often to carry troops, it was as a part of her commercial business and not as a requisitioned vessel.)



\* \* \* \* \*

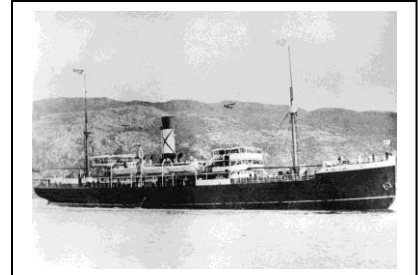
Some nineteen months prior to that April 9 of 1916, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914, the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits had undergone a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's and elsewhere in the city, and were formed into 'A' and 'B' Companies.

During that same period the various authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

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

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.

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 above: *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 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, and then 'E' Company five weeks less a day later again, on May 4\*.

*\*These five Companies, while a contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment, was not yet a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.*

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





Seven days after the arrival of 'E' Company in the Scottish capital, on May 11 the entire Newfoundland contingent had been ordered elsewhere. On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the unit had been dispatched to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, close to the town of Hawick.

(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 of Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)



Two months less a day later, on July 10, 'F' Company would march into *Stobs Camp*.

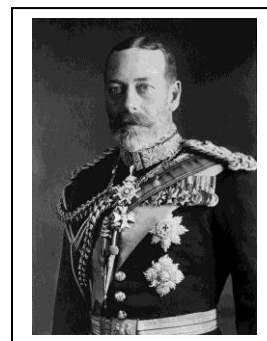
This had been an important moment: the Company's arrival was to bring the Newfoundland Regiment's numbers up to some fifteen hundred, establishment strength\* of a battalion which could be posted on...active service.



*\*A number sufficient for four 'fighting' companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

(Right above: *The men of the Regiment await their new Lee-Enfield rifles.* – original photograph from the *Provincial Archives*)

From *Stobs Camp*, some three weeks after the arrival of 'F' Company, in early August 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', the four senior Companies, having now become the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, had been transferred to *Aldershot Camp* in southern England. There they were to undergo final preparations – and a royal inspection – before the Battalion's departure to the Middle East and to the fighting on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



The later arrivals to the United Kingdom, 'E' and 'F' Companies, were to be posted to the new Regimental Depot and were eventually to form the nucleus of the soon to be formed 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment.

(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.)



(Right: *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 below: *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.*

The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer and the early autumn of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, there to serve as a base for the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion. It was from there – as of November of 1915 – that the new-comers were sent in drafts, at first to *Gallipoli* and then subsequently to the *Western Front*, to bolster the four fighting companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion\*.



That November 15 of 1915 (see above) was to see not only the departure of the 1<sup>st</sup> Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr to the Middle East and to the fighting of the *Gallipoli Campaign* but also, only five days prior, the arrival from Newfoundland of 'G' Company which would be obliged to take up quarters at *Gailes Camp*, some sixteen kilometres up the coast from Ayr itself – but just over sixty if one went by road.

A further seven weeks plus a day were now to pass before the first one-hundred personnel of 'H' Company, having sailed in mid-December as recorded in an earlier paragraph, were to present themselves at the Regimental Depot on January 4, some of them to be affected, even fatally, by an ongoing measles epidemic of the time.

After that there was now to be an interlude of three months plus several days before Private Mercer's detachment reported on the aforesaid April 9 to the Regimental Depot.

*Note: Until as late as the spring of 1916 it had been the intention to form a 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment to fight on the Continent. In fact it would seem that Private Mercer's contingent of one-hundred sixty-three recruits was to form the nucleus of that unit, while the personnel already at the Depot by this time would form a reserve battalion to serve as a re-enforcement pool for both the fighting units.*

*It could not have been long before a change of plan came about as very soon, men of Private Mercer's contingent (the second half of 'H' Company) were being sent – including Private Mercer himself – to strengthen the 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Battalion already on the Continent – maybe Beaumont-Hamel had something to do with it.*

\* \* \* \* \*

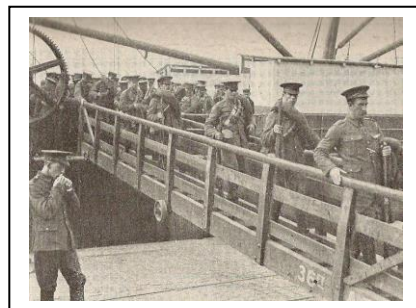
During the winter of 1915-1916 the men of the soon-to-be 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion had been lodged in several venues, at a nearby military camp at Gailes and also as far afield as the one at Paisley Barracks, some sixty-five kilometres distant. However, by the spring of 1916 the difficulty had been overcome by housing the men in a school, in a tented community and in the Ayr Racecourse Grandstand, all in the district of Newton-upon-Ayr.



(Preceding page: *The new race-course at Ayr - opened in 1907 – where the men of the Regiment were sometimes billeted and where they replaced some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photo from 2012*)

*\*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. Later recruits signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.*

By that time of his departure the Regimental Depot had already seen the dispatch of the first seven re-enforcement drafts from Ayr: the First directly to *Gallipoli*; the Second which had sailed to Egypt before being turned back to land in France; and the Third which had sailed straight to France at the end of the month of March. Those which had sailed since then – and those which were to do so later on – also had gone or would also cross directly to the Continent.



Private Mercer had not been selected to serve in any of the earlier drafts since his arrival at the Regimental Depot; he would remain posted in Scotland for some three months altogether before his turn was to come. When it *did* come, his draft was to be dispatched directly to France.

(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen earlier in the War on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

On July 9, the 8<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr, Private Mercer one of its *rank and file*, passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton en route to the Continent. On the morrow, the 10<sup>th</sup>, the detachment disembarked in Rouen, capital city of Normandy, and site of the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot which had been established there. There the draft spent time in final training and organization\* before proceeding on to its rendezvous with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

*\*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.*

There must have been a sense of urgency at the time: the 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Battalion had suffered terribly at a place called Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, and on July 6 its depleted strength, as reported by the Regimental War Diary, still numbered no more than one-hundred sixty-eight *other ranks*, one-sixth of establishment battalion (fighting) strength.

At this stage, Private Mercer's 8<sup>th</sup> Draft, a fairly large detachment, was to be divided, its personnel to march in one of the several re-enforcement drafts ordered at this time to report to the parent unit.

(continued)



He, Private Mercer, was one of the contingent of one-hundred twenty-six *other ranks* from Rouen to report...to *duty*...with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on July 21 in the small community of Acheux\*. The Newfoundland unit had marched to there from the trenches in the area forward of Maily-Maillet four days prior, and would continue this march as far as Beauval on the 23<sup>rd</sup> where they stayed for only forty-eight hours before covering – still on foot – a further twenty kilometres to Candas on the 26<sup>th</sup> to board a train.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had been ordered northwards into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

\* \* \* \* \*

A year prior to this juncture, in the summer of 1915, the Regimental Depot in Scotland had only just been beginning to evolve: both 'E' and 'F' Companies had only then been beginning their time of training at Ayr; as for Nathan Mercer, he had still to enlist and attest, after which he would then have those twenty-five days to wait before the call was to come to sail overseas to the United Kingdom.

The aforementioned four senior companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', of the Newfoundland Regiment, having now become the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had at this same time been attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and had been dispatched from *Camp Aldershot* to...*active service*.



(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: *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 of 1915, the Newfoundland Battalion had 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.

(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)*



(continued)

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: ‘*Kangaroo Beach*’, where the officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 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: 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)



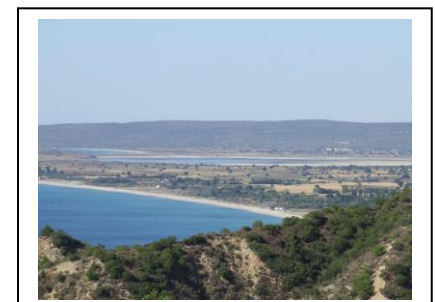
When the Newfoundlanders had landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* they were to disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion would now 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:

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.

*\*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)



(Right: *No-Man’s-Land* at *Suvla Bay* as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from *Provincial Archives*)





November 26 would see what perhaps was to be 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.

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

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, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.



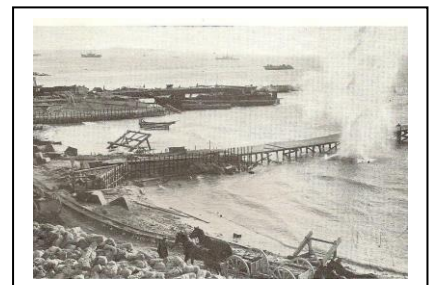
By this time the situation there had daily been becoming more and more untenable, thus on the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the entire area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.

Some of the Battalion personnel had thereupon 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 would be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, 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 by now simply 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 above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles under shell-fire 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.*

(continued)

***(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 and beyond.**

**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 had docked early on the morrow and where the Newfoundlanders had 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: 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.)***



***\*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)***



**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.**



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

**(continued)**

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*)

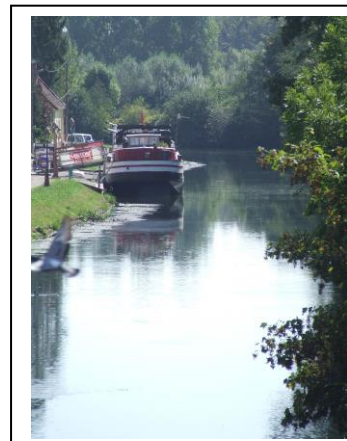


Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille.

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.

(Right: *A languid River 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 which they had then traversed on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to have become a part of their history.

On April 13, the entire 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*.

(Right: *A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?)*)



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 had then been ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.



(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*)



***\*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.***

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 had soon been 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: 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.*

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

It was to be the greatest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage of the...*First Battle of the Somme*...was to continue for four and a half months.

***(Right: Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village. – photographs from 2010 & 2015)***



**(continued)**

***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.***

After the events of the morning of July 1, 1916, such had then been the dire condition of the attacking British forces that it had been feared that any German counter-assault might well annihilate what had managed to survive of the British Expeditionary Force on *the Somme*.

The few remnants of the Newfoundland Battalion – and of the other depleted British units – had thus remained in the trenches perhaps fearing the worst, and at night searching for the wounded and burying the dead. It was to be July 6 before the Newfoundlanders were to be relieved from the forward area and to be ordered withdrawn to Englebelmer.

There were then a further two days before the unit had marched further again to the rear area and to billets in the village of Mailly-Maillet.



(Right above: *The re-constructed village of Mailly-Maillet – the French Monument aux Morts in the foreground - is twinned with the community of Torbay, St. John’s East. – photograph from 2009*)

There at Mailly-Maillet on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported...*to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the events at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was still to number only... *11 officers and 260 rifles...*after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

Of course, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had not been the only unit in the British Army to have incurred horrific losses on July 1, 1916, even though it had indeed been one of the most devastated. But even with its depleted numbers, the Battalion was needed and, after that first re-enforcement, it had almost immediately again been ordered to man the trenches of the front line: as of that July 14, undermanned as seen above, the Newfoundlanders began another tour in the trenches where...*we were shelled heavily by enemy’s 5.9 howitzers and a good deal of damage was done to the trenches* (excerpt from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary).

A second re-enforcement draft from Rouen had then arrived days later, on July 21, while the Newfoundland Battalion was at Acheux and then, only three days afterwards – at the very time day that the Prime Minister of Newfoundland had visited the unit – a third draft of sixty other ranks had arrived in Beauval and reported...*to duty*.

As recorded in an earlier paragraph, it had been as a soldier of the second of the three above-mentioned contingents that Private Mercer had reported...*to duty...*with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and then was to move by train into Belgium.

\* \* \* \* \*

On July 27-28 of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong – maybe even fewer - even after still further re-enforcement – would move northwards and enter into the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

(Right above: *The entrance to ‘A’ Company’s quarters – obviously renovated since that time – sunk in the ramparts of the city of Ypres, when the Newfoundland Battalion was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *The same re-constructed ramparts as shown above, here viewed from just outside the city and from the far side of the moat which still partially surrounds it – image from 2010*)

The unit had been ordered to the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate on the entire *Western Front*, there to continue to re-enforce and to re-organize after the ordeal of Beaumont-Hamel.

(Right: *Canadian trenches in Sanctuary Wood, not far removed from the Newfoundland Battalion’s positions during August and September of 1916 – photograph from 2010*)

*The Salient* – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders’ posting there; yet they nonetheless would incur casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

And it was to be there in *the Salient* in the sector of a place called *Railway Wood*, that the parent Newfoundland Battalion would soon be serving after its transfer had been completed from France.

(Right above: *Railway Wood, the Newfoundland positions at the time, almost a century later – a monument to the twelve Royal Engineers buried alive there may just be perceived on the periphery of the trees – photograph from 2014*)

(Right: *The already-battered city of Ypres seen here towards the end of the year 1915 – and some eight months before the Newfoundlanders were to be posted there for the first time – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 8, 1916, after having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the Newfoundland Battalion would be ordered to return southwards. The unit was thereupon transported by train back into France, back into the area of the...*First Battle of – the Somme*.





Just four days after unit's return to France from Belgium, on October 12 of 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment would again be ordered to take to the offensive; it was at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.

The encounter was to prove to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred and thirty-nine casualties all told – for little gain.

(Right above: *This is the ground over which the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon.* – photograph from 2007)

(Right: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's advance of October 12, 1916.* – photograph from 2012)

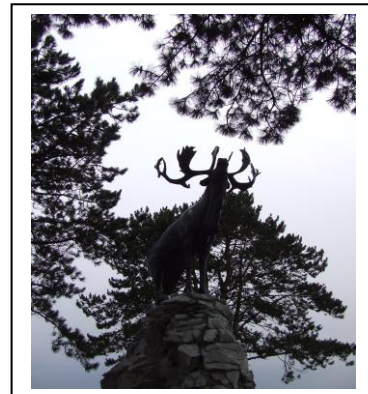
After the confrontation of October 12 the Newfoundland Battalion was not then to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it furnished two-hundred fifty men to act as stretcher-bearers in an attack undertaken by troops of two British regiments, the Hampshires and the Worcestershires, of the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of which, of course, the Newfoundland unit was a battalion.

(Right above: *Stretcher-bearers not only shared the dangers of the battle-field with their arms-bearing comrades, but they often spent a longer period of time exposed to those same perils. This photograph was likely taken during First Somme.* – from *Illustration*)

On October 30, the Newfoundland unit eventually retired towards rear positions away from the Gueudecourt area. It had been serving continuously in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day.

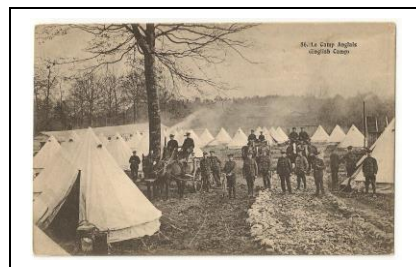
Two days later the Newfoundlanders were organizing themselves in the community of Ville-sous-Corbie where they were about to spend the next two weeks. It may have been that this was to be a genuine period of rest and re-enforcement as the Battalion War Diarist has recorded absolutely nothing about training, courses, route marches or work-parties – although that may be a bit hard to believe.

Back in the trenches by November 19, the Newfoundland unit continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter. It would be a period to be broken only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas season, encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.



(Right below: A typical British Army Camp during rather inclement winter conditions somewhere on the Continent – from a vintage post-card)

The Christmas festivities having been completed – turkey dinner washed down with...*real ale*...apparently – it was not to be until a further sixteen days had passed, January 11, that the Newfoundland Battalion would be ordered out of *Corps Reserve* and from its lodgings at *Camps en Amienois* to make its way on foot to the town of Airaines.



From the railway station there it then entrained for the small town of Corbie – again Corbie - where it thereupon took over billets which it had already occupied for a short period only two months before. Days later again the unit continued its progress back up to the forward area and to...*active service*. That recent six-week Christmas respite spent far to the rear by now a thing of the past, the Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to...*active service*...on January 23, although they apparently had already returned to the trenches by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

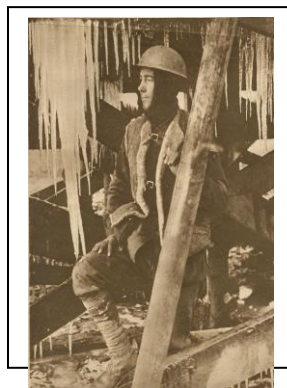
It was by this time the beginning of the winter period. As had been and as was to be the case of all the winter periods of the *Great War* – that of 1916-1917 would be a time of relative calm, although cold and uncomfortable – there was a shortage of fuel and many other things, particularly in 1917 - for most of the combatants of both sides. It would also be a time of sickness, and the medical facilities were kept busy, particularly, so it seems - at least according to Canadian medical documents and records - with thousands of cases of dental work.

This period also provided the opportunity to undergo training and familiarization with the new practices and the recent weaponry of war; in the case of the Newfoundland Battalion these exercises were to be at least partially undertaken in the vicinity of the communities of Carnoy and Coisy where the unit was to be deployed for some two weeks.

On February 18 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion started a five-day trek back from Coisy to the forward area where it had gone back into the firing-line on February 23, relieving a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers.

This relief would come about at a place called Saily-Saillisel and the reception offered to the newcomers by the Germans was warm, lively – and deadly: after only two days the Battalion had incurred four dead, nine wounded and three gassed without there having been any infantry action. The Newfoundlanders were to be withdrawn on February 25, two days hence...but were then to return only three days later again.

They had been carrying with them orders for a...*bombing raid*...on the enemy positions at Saily-Saillisel...to be carried out on March 1.



(Right above: A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, his unit to be relieved by the Newfoundlanders on March 1, enjoys his cigarette in the cold of the trenches at Saily-Saillisel during the winter of 1916-1917. – from *Illustration*)

In fact, the sole infantry activity *directly* involving the Newfoundland unit during that entire period – from Gueudecourt in mid-October, 1916, until Monchy-le-Preux in mid-April of 1917 – was to be that sharp engagement at Sailly-Saillisel at the end of February and the beginning of March, an action which would bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.

(Right: *The fighting during the period of the Battalion's posting to Sailly-Saillisel took place on the far side of the village which was no more than a heap of rubble at the time. - photograph from 2009(?)*)



After Sailly-Saillisel the month of March would be a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they were now to spend their time near the communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and in training for upcoming events. They even had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band come from Ayr, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.

(Right: *The Prime Minister of Newfoundland visiting the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, encamped at Meaulté – from The War Illustrated*)



(Right below: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras at the time of the Great War, in early 1916 – from Illustration*)

On March 29, the Newfoundlanders began to make their way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, the march to finish amid the rubble of the village of Monchy-le-Preux.



(Right adjacent: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood atop Vimy Ridge since 1936 – photograph from 2010*)

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a major French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties – just over four thousand - this attack was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, its only positive episode to be the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday, 1917.



And while the British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, the French *Bataille du Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(continued)



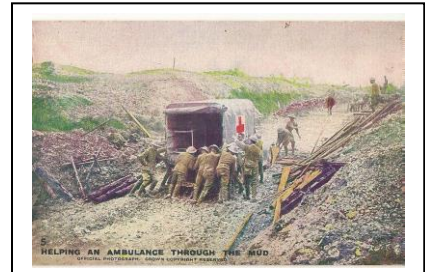
The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to play its part during the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at the place called Monchy-le-Preux on April 14 and which would finish ten days later, on April 23, perhaps a kilometre distant, at *Les Fosses Farm*. After Beaumont-Hamel, the ineptly-planned action at Monchy-le-Preux proved to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war: four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone\*.

(Right: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen in 1917, from the western, British, side of the community: The Newfoundlanders advanced, out of the ruins of the place, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)



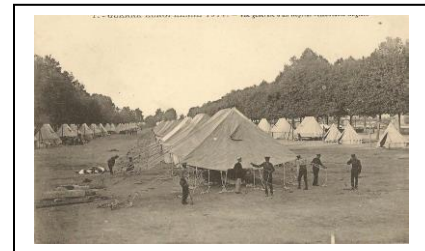
*\*It was also an action in which a DSO, an MC and eight MMs were won by a small group of nine personnel of the Battalion – the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) awarded to the unit's Commanding officer. An MM for the same action was also presented to a private from the Essex Regiment .*

Private Mercer was wounded while serving with 'C' Company during the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux on April 14. He was evacuated on the following day to the 8<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Agnez-les-Duisans having incurred multiple gunshot wounds to both his legs and to his back.



(Right above: *Transferring sick and wounded from the forward area to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card*)



The son of Elijah Mercer, fisherman – to whom he had allocated a daily allowance of seventy cents from his pay and to whom he had willed his all - and of Mary Mercer of Church Hill, Upper Island Cove, Conception Bay, he was also brother to Delphine, Emma-Susannah, John, Edna, Julia-Ann, Mary-Jane and to Ellen-Ann.

Private Mercer was reported as having...*died of wounds*...on April 21, 1917, in the same 8<sup>th</sup> CCS.



At home it was the Reverend E. E. Rusted of Upper Island Cove who was requested to bear the news to his family.

Nathan Mercer had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-three years and five months of age: date of birth in Upper Island Cove, Newfoundland, September 9, 1892 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands atop the remains of a German strongpoint in the centre of the re-constructed village. – photograph from 2009(?)*)

Private Nathan Mercer was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also 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 4, 2023.