



Private William Mercer (Regimental Number 2615), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *shoe-factory worker* for *Archibald Brothers* earning six dollars a week, William Mercer was a volunteer of the Ninth Recruitment Draft. He presented himself for medical examination on April 26 of 1916 at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury** in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.



**The building was to serve as the Regimental Headquarters in Newfoundland for the duration of the conflict.*

On the day following that medical assessment, April 27, and at the same venue, William Mercer would enlist. He was engaged...*for the duration of the war**...at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar to which was to be appended a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

**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.*

Only some few hours were now to follow before there then came to pass, while still at the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the same twenty-seventh day of April he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, William Mercer became...*a soldier of the King*.

Private Mercer, Number 2615, would not now sail to the United Kingdom until a lengthy period of twelve weeks less a day had then elapsed. How he was to spend this prolonged interval after his attestation appears not to have been documented. It may be that he was to return to work temporarily and also to spend time with his family and friends at his home in the Conception Bay community of Harbour Grace but, of course, this conclusion is a little bit speculative and he may well have chosen – or *been* chosen - to remain in barracks to be billeted and trained in the capital city*.

**A number of the recruits, those whose home was not in St. John's or close to the capital city, or those who had no friends or family to offer them board and lodging, were to be quartered in the curling rink in the area of Fort William in St. John's, a building which was at the time to serve as barracks.*

It was to be the vessel *SS Sicilian* which would carry Private Mercer and his draft overseas. Apparently it was a detachment two-companies strong, thus five-hundred Regimental personnel, that sailed from St. John's on July 19, 1916, in the company of a contingent of Newfoundland Royal Naval Reservists and some three-hundred civilian passengers since the vessel was on a scheduled commercial route from Canada to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when 'Sicilian' was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War. During the Great War she was apparently requisitioned as a troopship on only one occasion: in October of 1914 she was a vessel of the armada which transported the (1st) Canadian Division overseas to the United Kingdom. She otherwise continued to work commercially between Great Britain and Canada for her owners, the Allan Line and later Canadian Pacific, at times carrying soldiery if and when her schedule allowed.

The ship carried Newfoundland military personnel eastwards across the Atlantic three times, all in the year 1916.)

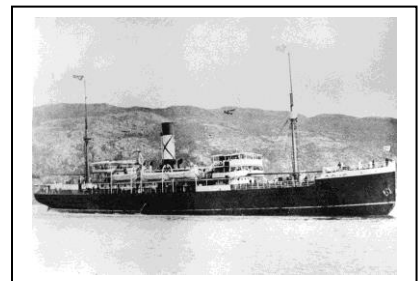
Upon the arrival of *Sicilian* in British waters, the ship proceeded to the south-coast Royal Naval port of Devonport where the first contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment had landed with the (1st) Canadian Division in October of 1914. Having arrived in port during the last days of July, from there the reservists left for naval barracks, Private Mercer and his comrades-in-arms now boarded a train for the journey north to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot.



(Right above: A no-longer bustling Devonport Harbour, today bereft of its former importance – photograph from 2012)

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Some two years prior to that September 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 in both Newfoundland and the United Kingdom had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

(Preceding page: *The image of 'Florizel' at anchor in St. John's Harbour 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 1st 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.

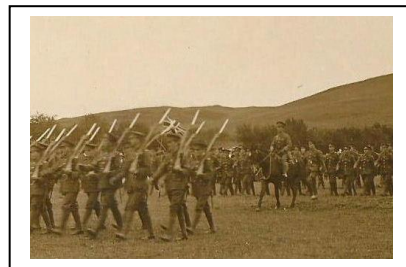
Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 of 1915, 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent - would arrive directly – through Liverpool of course - from Newfoundland. On the final day of the month of March it had been the turn of '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 above: *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 above: *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*)

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

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: *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 below: *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*)

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 1st 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*.

(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*)

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 yet-to-be-formed first re-enforcement drafts for the 1st Battalion.

Ayr was a small town on the west coast of Scotland whose history precedes the year 1205 when it was established as a Royal Burgh (Borough) by the crown of Scotland, an appointment which emphasized the importance of the town as a harbour, market and, later, administrative centre. By the time of the Great War centuries later it was expanding and the River Ayr which had once marked the northern boundary of the place was now flowing



through its centre; a new town to the north (Newton-on-Ayr), its population fast-increasing, perhaps encouraged by the coming of the railway, was soon to be housing the majority of the personnel of the Newfoundland Regimental Depot.

A further seven weeks plus a day were now to pass before the first one-hundred officers and men 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, unfortunately, to be affected, even fatally, by the measles epidemic of the time.

After that there was then to be an interlude of three months plus several days before the second detachment of 'H' Company reported on April 9, 1916, to the Regimental Depot.

Note: Until as late as the spring of 1916 it had been the intention to form a 2nd Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment to fight on the Continent. In fact it would seem that the last-mentioned 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 that contingent (the second half of 'H' Company) were being sent to strengthen the 1st Newfoundland Battalion already on the Continent – maybe Beaumont-Hamel had something to do with it.

Then towards mid-summer, of course, and as seen above, it was the turn of Private Mercer and his detachment to report to the Regimental Depot in Scotland.

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The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, there to eventually serve as the base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion. It was from there – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers arriving from home were despatched in drafts, at first to *Gallipoli* and later to the *Western Front*, to bolster the four fighting companies of the 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *Wellington Square (see following paragraph) seen here almost a century after it hosted the officers of the Newfoundland Regiment – photograph from 2012)*

At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to be able to accommodate the number of new arrivals – plus men from other British regiments which were still being billeted in the area...and the measles epidemic which was to claim the life of several Regiment personnel – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in the town-centre of Ayr itself, and the *other ranks* had been billeted at Newton Park School and otherwise in the grandstand or a tented camp at the newly-built racecourse in the suburb of Newton-upon-Ayr – on the far side of the river.

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(Right: *The new race-course at Newton-upon-Ayr - opened in 1907 – where men of the Regiment were sometimes billeted and where they would replace some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photograph from 2012*)



The 12th Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr – Private Mercer one of the detachment's rank and file - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 11 of 1916 on its way to the Continent and to the *Western Front*.

The contingent subsequently disembarked in the Norman capital of Rouen on the next day, October 12, and spent time at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot located there, in final training and organization*, before making its way to a rendezvous with the parent 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *British troops disembark at an earlier date in the Great War at Rouen on their way 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.*

Private Mercer's contingent was to comprise a single officer and two-hundred twenty-six *other ranks* by the time it reported for duty at the *Bernafay Wood Camp* on October 22. Still in the area of Gueudecourt, the Newfoundland Battalion had been relieved in the front line three days before, on the 19th, but only to provide working parties to repair damaged roads and to construct new ones. Only days later, the Battalion had returned to the forward area.



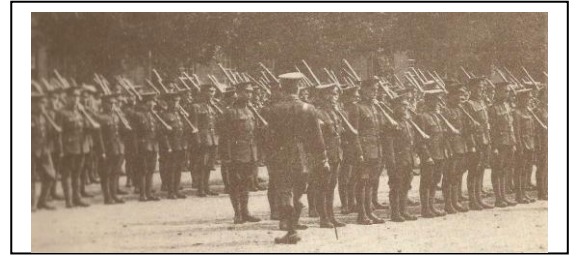
(Right above: *Bernafay Wood a century later – not being close to the front lines, the wood may have resembled what is seen here – photograph from 2014*)

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By the time that Private Mercer joined the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment on that October 22 of 1916, the first contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment had already been serving overseas for just more than two years. The 2nd (Reserve) Battalion had been formed – in the spring of 1916 - and as seen in a prior paragraph, twelve re-enforcement drafts had already been dispatched from Ayr to supplement the strength of the 1st Battalion (see immediately below).

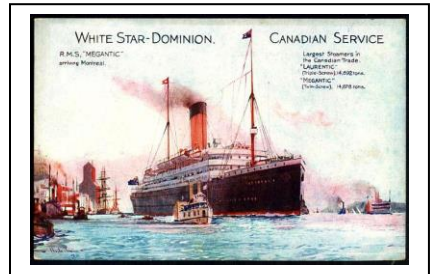
As for William Mercer, he had by this time been a soldier of the Newfoundland Regiment for one-hundred seventy-eight days.

The four senior companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', had become in the summer of 1915 the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment and had thereupon been attached to the 88th Infantry Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. The force had soon been dispatched from *Camp Aldershot* to...active service.



(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.)*

(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. 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: *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: *'Kangaroo Beach', where the officers and men of the 1st 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)*



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.

(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)*



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:

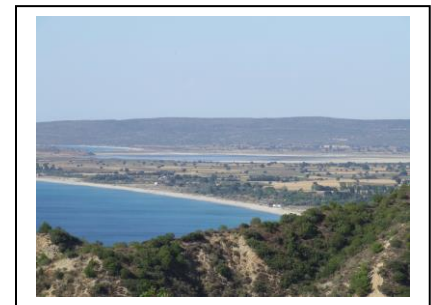
Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and of course the casualties inflicted by an enemy who was to fight a great deal better than the British High Command* had ever anticipated – were eventually to overwhelm the British-led forces and those of their allies, the French, and it would finally 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: *No-Man's-Land* at *Suvla Bay* as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from *Provincial Archives*)



(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*)



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.

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.

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

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 serving there, to be part of the rear-guard.

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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 1st 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.



(Right: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles under shell-fire only days before the final British evacuation* – from *Illustration*)

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.

**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 evacuation of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*, the 1st Battalion 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 1st Battalion on board. The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16th, 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 29th Division had yet to be decided*.

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(Preceding page: *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.*)

(Right: *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 already becoming a theatre of war.*

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 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*)



The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseille, on March 22.

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



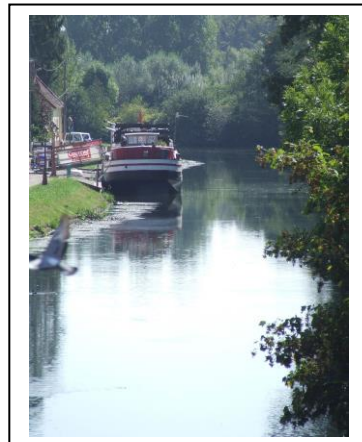
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille.

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.

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.

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

But some three months later *the Somme* was to have become a part of their history.

On April 13, the entire 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*.

(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.

**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: *Beaumont-Hamel: Looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which stands atop part of the German front-line defences: The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009*)

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.

(Right above: *A view of Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?)*)

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*.

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

**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 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 a further four and a half months.



(Right above: *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.

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 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 Maily-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 14th of July, 1916, the 1st 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 1st 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 1st 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*.

(Right: *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*)



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



(Right adjacent below: *Canadian trenches in Sanctuary Wood, not far removed from the Newfoundland Battalion's positions during August and September of 1916 – photograph 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.

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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.

(Right: *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*)



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.

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

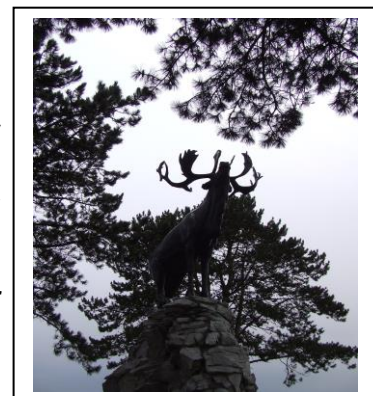
Just four days after unit's return to France from Belgium, on October 12 of 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to take to the offensive; it was at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village at a dozen kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.

The encounter was 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 1st 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 action 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 had 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 88th Infantry Brigade of which, of course, the Newfoundland unit was a battalion.

(Right: *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*)



And it had been, of course, during the days following the aforesaid action, on October 22, that Private Mercer and his draft from Rouen had reported...to *duty*...with the Newfoundland Battalion at the *Bernafay Wood Camp*.

* * * * *

Eight days after Private Mercer's arrival at the *Front*, on October 30, 1916, the Newfoundland unit had been on its way towards rear positions away from the Gueudecourt area where the personnel was now to spend two weeks in the area of the community of Ville-sous-Corbie, re-enforcing and reorganizing.

By that October 30, the Battalion had been serving almost continuously in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day. It was now not to be until November 15 that the Newfoundlanders began to wend their way back to the front lines.

Back in the forward area on or about November 17, the Newfoundland unit continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the next few weeks of the late autumn.

It would be a period to then be interrupted by several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas season, encamped well behind the lines, in close proximity and to the south-west of the city of Amiens. The unit began to retire – apart from the two-hundred fifty ordered to serve in working-parties – on December 11-12.



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

The Christmas festivities of 1916 having concluded – turkey dinner washed down with...*real ale*...apparently – it was on that 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 the unit then entrained for the small town of Corbie where it thereupon would take 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 fatalities – of 1917.

It was now to be the beginning of the winter period on the *Western Front*. As had been and 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 to be a shortage of fuel and many other things - for most of the combatants of both sides.

It would also be a time of sickness, and the medical facilities were to be kept busy, particularly, so it seems - from at least Canadian medical documentation - 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.

On February 18, the 1st Battalion initiated a five-day trek back from Coisy to the forward area where it was to return into the firing-line on February 23 in the vicinity of the ruins of a village by the name of Sailly-Saillisel.

When the Newfoundland Battalion returned to the forward area on February 23, it was to relieve a unit of the 1st Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. It was at the afore-mentioned Sailly-Saillisel, and the reception offered by the Germans was to be both 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...to return just three days later.

They were carrying with them orders for a...*bombing raid*...on the enemy positions at Sailly-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 Sailly-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 above: *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(?)*)

(continued)

After the confrontation at Sailly-Saillisel the Newfoundland Battalion retired to the rear area by train, to an encampment in the vicinity of the community of Meaulté. There, and later at *Camps-en-Amienois* – even further behind the lines – the Newfoundland unit was to spend almost the entire remainder of that month.

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 then also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.



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

On March 29 the Newfoundlanders commenced making 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: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras at the time of the Great War, in early 1916 – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *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.

The 1st 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 would prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war: four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone*.



(Preceding page: *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.*



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

The son of Leander Mercer*, shoe-factory worker – a *heeler* - at Archibald Bros., and of Priscilla May Mercer (née Drover*, deceased of consumption on December 8, 1901) of Water Street West in Harbour Grace, he was also brother to Helen-Kathleen, Ethel, George, Theresa and Nellie - step-brother to Violet, Ethel, Daisy – and half-brother to Kenneth, Priscilla (or *Druscilla*), Eloil (sic) and Leander Jr..

*Records show the following:

- a) *Leander Mercer was married for the first time in Lynn, Massachusetts, on December 24, 1894, to Priscilla Drover, also from Newfoundland.*
- b) *Priscilla Drover died from consumption in Upper Island Cove on December 3 or 8, 1901.*
- c) *Leander Mercer, widower, married Leonora Mercer (née Young(?), widow - perhaps of Thomas Mercer), in Upper Island Cove on November 24, 1904.*
- d) *Leander Mercer made the crossing on the SS Bruce on June 20, 1907, accompanied by four children: Ethel, aged one year and a half; George, five years; William, ten years; Nellie, aged eight years.*
- e) *According to a copy of the 1921 Census, a son, Kenneth, was born in Upper Island Cove in 1908.*
- f) *On April 4 of 1911, Leander Drover, widower, was again married in Upper Island Cove, on this occasion to Priscilla May Drover (sic). The 1921 Census lists three children – Violet and Ethel, likely a twin, and Dais(e)y – presumably from her former marriage.*

Private Mercer was reported as...*missing in action*...on April 14, 1917, while fighting at Monchy-le-Preux. Some thirty weeks later, on November 17, he was officially...*presumed dead*.



(continued)

William Mercer had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years and six months: date of birth in Lynn, Essex, Massachusetts, USA, October 26, 1895 (from the Massachusetts Birth Register).

(Preceding page: *The War Memorial in Harbour Grace honours the sacrifice of Private Mercer.* – photograph from 2012)

Private William 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. Last updated – February 3, 2023.