



Private James O'Brien (Regimental Number 1160) is buried in Ayr Cemetery, Ayrshire – Grave reference G.3.1.

His occupation previous to his military service recorded as that of a *coachman* on the railway, working for the *Reid Newfoundland Company* and earning a weekly ten dollars, James O'Brien presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on February 16, 1915. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

It was to be only a single following his medical assessment, on February 17, that he returned to the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road to enlist – engaged at the private soldier's rate of a single dollar per diem plus a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance*.

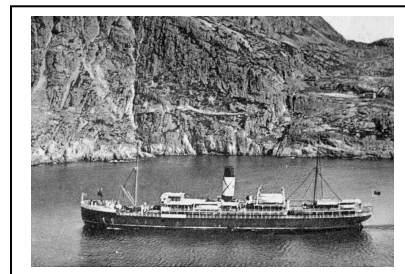
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Then, twelve days later again, on March 1, he was now to be attested, to swear the *Oath of Allegiance*, the *final* formality. At that moment, James O'Brien thereupon became...a *soldier of the King*.

Following attestation there passed a lengthy period of seven weeks and three days - there appear to be no details of how or where he spent this time: he may temporarily have resumed work or simply remained at home; to guess which, or anything else, would be mere speculation. Then, on April 22, 1915, Private O'Brien, Number 1160, embarked in the harbour of St. John's for...*overseas service*...with the two-hundred forty-nine officers and...*other ranks*...of 'E' Company onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax.

Two days later, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening, the detachment began its trans-Atlantic passage on board the trans-Atlantic liner *SS Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool, to arrive in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded although the second may well have been the date of disembarkation.

The Newfoundlanders on this occasion had sailed from Halifax in the company of the Canadian Army Service Corps *Railway Supply Depot*.



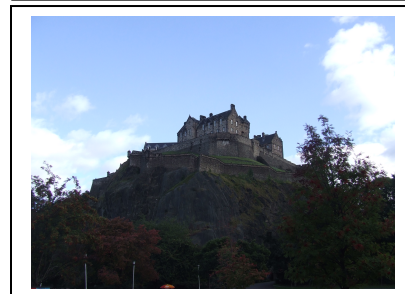
(Right above: *The image of 'Stephano' passing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is shown by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right: *The image of 'Missanabie' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries website. The vessel was of the Canadian Pacific Line and, although transporting troops during the Great War, did so as part of her commercial services which continued during the conflict. On September 9, 1918, she was torpedoed and sunk off the south coast of Ireland with the loss of forty-five lives.*)



From Liverpool the contingent travelled northwards by train to the Scottish capital, Edinburgh where, on May 4, 'E' Company joined 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies which had already taken up station as the garrison at the historic Castle, the first troops from outside the British Isles ever to do so.

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



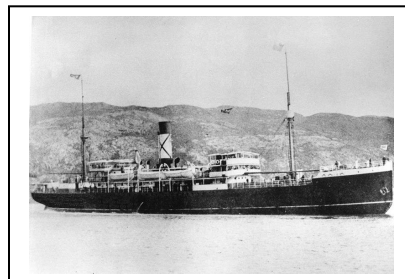
Private O'Brien's 'E' Company, however, was to have but a few days to savour the charms of the Scottish capital.

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Some seven months before that May 4, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's for the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits – these to become 'A' and 'B' Companies - during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after a recruit's enlistment and/ or attestation. To become known to history as the *First Five Hundred* and also as the *Blue Puttees*, on that day they had boarded the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting in St. John's Harbour.



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

The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.



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

Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom this first Newfoundland contingent was to train in three venues during the late autumn of 1914 and then the winter of 1914-1915: firstly in southern England on the *Salisbury Plain*; then in Scotland at *Fort George* – on the *Moray Firth* close to Inverness; and lastly at *Edinburgh Castle* – where, as recorded beforehand, it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 of 1915, 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent* - would arrive directly – through Liverpool of course - from Newfoundland. On the final day of the month of March it had been the turn of 'D' Company to arrive – they via Halifax as well as Liverpool – to report...*to duty*...at Edinburgh.

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

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Seven days after Private O'Brien's 'E' Company's arrival in the Scottish capital, on May 11 the entire Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the unit was dispatched to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.

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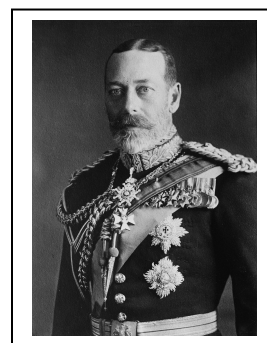
It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent would eventually receive the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. On that date the now-formed 1st Battalion of the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

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



**This was approximately fifteen hundred, sufficient to furnish two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot. This force, now the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



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

Meanwhile the two junior Companies, ‘E’ – as seen, the last arrived at Edinburgh - and the aforementioned ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

At the end of this summer of 1915, the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland’s west coast was in the throes of becoming the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment from where – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts from home were to be despatched to bolster the 1st Battalion’s numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were quartered the ‘other ranks’, is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right. – by courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)



The Regimental Depot, however, was to be Private O’Brien’s home for but a few days.

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(Preceding page: *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.*

There appears to be no record as to when his problem was first diagnosed, although the documents show him to have been admitted into hospital at some time between August 7 and 20. The records also show that when it had been discovered that Private O'Brien was suffering from an abscessed liver, an operation had subsequently been performed – unsuccessfully – ten days prior to his death.

The son of James O' Brien (deceased in 1899) and of Mary O'Brien – to whom he had allotted a daily allowance of sixty-five cents from his pay - of 27, Adelaide Street, St. John's, his own address is recorded as 11 College Square – this apparently his mother's address in April of 1915. He was the fourth of seven siblings: May, 35; Maud, 29; Bella, 27; Private James O'Brien; Bride, 25; John, 22; and Leo, 20 (ages as of 1919)*.

**Two of his brothers apparently also served in uniform: Private John O' Brien, Number 3214, wounded on the first day of the Battle of Cambrai, November 20, 1917, survived the War but was to be discharged as medically unfit in October of 1918; Leo joined the Newfoundland Forestry Corps, Number 8261, and also survived the conflict.*

Private O'Brien was reported as having...*died of sickness*...in the 2nd Scottish General Hospital Edinburgh, at half-past-nine on the morning of October 2, 1915. Apparently, his personal kit was subsequently auctioned for a total of eighteen shillings and seven pence, and he had just five shillings on his person.

James O'Brien had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-two years of age.

Private James O'Brien was entitled to the British War Medal for his overseas service.

(The photograph of Private O'Brien is from the Provincial Archives.)



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – February 6, 2023.