



Private Felix O'Connell – elsewhere found simply as *Connell* - (Regimental Number 3596) is interred in St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Cemetery in the town of Bonavista.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a clerk having worked for the company of *Frank Ryan* for four years, and at the time earning a weekly fifteen dollars, Felix O'Connell was a volunteer of the Fourteenth Recruitment Draft. Apparently already working in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, he presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury on April 14 of 1917. 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.***

It was to be on the day of that medical assessment, April 14, while at the same venue, that Felix O'Connell would enlist. He was thus 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 subsequently came to pass, while still at the ***CLB Armoury*** on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the same fourteenth day of that month of April he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, Felix O'Connell became...***a soldier of the King.***

Following his enlistment it is likely that Private O'Connell reported...***to duty***...to be quartered in the temporary barracks apparently established since 1915 in the St. John's curling rink and the ***Prince's Skating Rink*** in the eastern end of the city. It was also surely there where he would stay up until the time of his departure.

(Right: ***This photograph of the Prince's Rink in St. John's with military personnel, apparently attired in uniforms of Great War vintage, on parade is from the Ice Hockey Wiki web-site. There appears to be no further information a propos.)***



Five weeks since attestation having passed, Private O'Connell, Number 3696, was to be one of a contingent of three officers and one-hundred eighty-two ***other ranks*** – a draft to which had been appended ninety-nine recruits of the newly-formed Newfoundland Forestry Unit - which sailed from St. John's on May 19 having embarked onto the Bowring Brother's vessel ***Florizel***, to reach Halifax some two days afterwards.



From there the Newfoundlanders were to traverse the Atlantic on an unspecified ship*, although it may well be that the transport in question was to be one of the largest ocean-going vessels of its day: ***Olympic.***

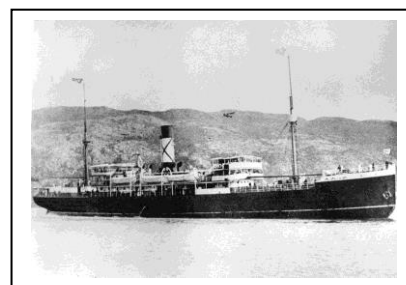
(Preceding page: *The White Star liner Olympic – sister ship to the ill-starred Titanic and also Britannic which, as a hospital ship, had been sunk in November of 1916 – had been requisitioned to serve as a troop transport during the war. She sailed on this occasion on June 2 from Halifax with as many as six-thousand Canadian military personnel on board and as there appear to have been no other departures on or about this date, she may have accommodated the Newfoundland troops. – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*

****It could just also have been – both sailed on May 21 – either Tunisian or Missanabie.***

Once having arrived and dis-embarked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on June 9 – this the date on which *Olympic* docked – Private O’Connell and his contingent entrained for the west coast of Scotland to report there to the Regiment Depot.

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Some two years and ten months prior to that month of June of 1917 when Private O’Connell was to find himself in Scotland, 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 on both sides of the Atlantic had also been preparing for the Regiment’s transfer overseas.

(Right above: *The image of ‘Florizel’ at anchor in the harbour at St. John’s in October of 1914 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. 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.



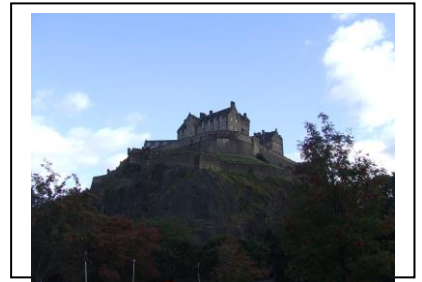
(Right above: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011)*

(continued)

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*, 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 all-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.*

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 by that time become the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, had been transferred to *Aldershot Camp* in southern England.

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



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*.

(Preceding page: *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 taken from the *Bain News Services* as presented by the *Wikipedia* web-site.)

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 first re-enforcements to be dispatched to the 1st Battalion.

(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*)



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.

(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.

That November 15 of 1915 was to see not only the departure of the 1st 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 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 designated 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.

A further draft from Newfoundland arrived at Ayr towards mid-summer, this comprising a two-company detachment and some naval reservists, sailors who, having disembarked from *Sicilian* in Devonport, were to remain there in England.

Some weeks later again *Sicilian* would sail from Newfoundland once more to arrive in England in the first week in September, 1916, with two-hundred forty-two recruits on board. By the 5th day of the month the new-comers, formerly 'C' Company of the 3rd Battalion stationed back in St. John's, had reported to the Regimental Depot.

There was now to be a particularly protracted interval before any large numbers re-enforcements were to arrive from Newfoundland – a problem which was later to affect the capabilities of the parent 1st Battalion fighting on the Continent.

The main cause of the difficulty, as seen further above, would be those troops which had been dispatched from St. John's and had reached Halifax on board *Florizel* at the end of January, 1917, only to be then held there for some three months before they were to arrive in Scotland where the regulation fourteen weeks of training then awaited them – although in the case of most of this draft, this period was to be much shorter than prescribed.

Another fifty or so recruits would arrive a week later, perhaps on *Olympic*, from Halifax via Liverpool and yet a further one-hundred eighty-five at the beginning of June, this the draft of which Private O'Connell was a soldier - but the number of potential recruits to be found in Newfoundland was by now diminishing.

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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, and was 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 seen here almost a century after it hosted the officers of the Newfoundland Regiment – photograph from 2012)

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(Right below: *The new race-course at Newton-upon-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 – 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 a 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 if not, in the grandstand or a tented camp at the newly-built racecourse in the suburb of Newton-upon-Ayr*.



During the summer months of 1917, the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was transferred from Ayr to not far-distant Barry. Initially intended to be a permanent move, the protest from several quarters was so great that the Newfoundlanders were back in Ayr by the third week of September.

It was during this period while posted to Barry that Private O'Connell was charged with the offence of... *whilst on active service deserting his majesty's force*. He was absent from August 27 until September 20 at which time he re-joined 2nd (Reserve) Battalion. For this offence he was awarded seventy-two days detention, a decision taken on September 27 by a Court Martial. During the latter part of his sentence, Private Connell was admitted into the 4th Scottish General Hospital in Glasgow, from November 22 until the 29th, for treatment to a venereal problem.

Perhaps he was at some point re-admitted into that institution for further medical attention as his file records him as then absenting himself from hospital in Glasgow on December 3. No more is then to be heard of Private O'Connell for ten days until his apprehension for felony by the civil authorities in Edinburgh. Awarded thirty days detention in His Majesty's Prison from the magistrate on December 19, he was handed back to his unit – at Ayr? - on January 18 of the New Year, 1918.

By this time the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion and the Regimental Depot was about to move quarters from the Royal Borough of Ayr in Scotland to southern England, to *Hazely Down Camp*, Hampshire, in the vicinity of the historic cathedral city of Winchester. This transfer was finalized during the last part of January, 1918.

Private O'Connell was undoubtedly at *Hazely Down Camp* by January 24, as he was reported as having absented from parade on that particular morning*.



(Right: *Troops on the march through a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp at some time during the winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated*)

On February 6, some two weeks later again, Private O'Connell was once more reported as...*when on active service absenting himself...from midnight Feb. 6th until apprehended by Mil Police at Leeds 11.30 am 2/4/18**. By that time he had been again declared a deserter and upon his return a Court Martial awarded him a further twenty-eight day detention.

**This likely should read 28/2/18 as he was also deprived of twenty-three days' pay – the period being February 6 to 28 - and the 28th was also the date on which he was charged with desertion. April 2 was surely the date on which he finished serving his sentence – in custody at Leeds, the Chief Constable's Office later claiming for his maintenance during this period - and on which date he was returned to 'C' Company at Hazely Down Camp.*

On April 9, Private O'Connell was admitted into the Special Division of the Military Hospital in Chiseldon: he was suffering from syphilis. There he remained until his release after thirty-nine days, on May 17.

Just a week later after his latest release, Private O'Connell was back in hospital at Chiseldon, again with the same complaint. However, subsequent tests on this occasion also revealed that he had further problems: pneumonia and pulmonary tuberculosis. On June 13, while he was still in hospital, a Medical Board declared him as...*permanently medically unfit for future service and recommended his discharge and repatriation.*

**Apart from the thirty days spent in Edinburgh Prison, Private O'Connell was also to incur the displeasure of the military authorities on more than one occasion: for other unauthorized absences he was to forfeit twenty-eight days' pay and be...Confined to Barracks or Detention...for a total of ninety-two further days during the time he spent in England. It may also be mentioned that he was to spend at some seventy days in hospital.*

The time spent in the United Kingdom could not have been a happy time in the young man's life.

Private O'Connell embarked at the *Tilbury Docks* just to the east of London with the 70th Repatriation Draft and sailed for Quebec on August 7 of that year. He arrived back in Newfoundland and reported to Headquarters on August 24*, a second source cites the 26th, before subsequently being granted a fourteen-day period of leave from August 27 until September 10 – no details appear to have been recorded.

A local Medical Board had then, on September 23, confirmed his discharge as...*medically unfit...and had further recommended that he be admitted into the Jensen Camp* for tubercular patients on Blackmarsh Road. Whether this last recommendation was ever acted upon is not clear as at one point he was to express his intention to travel to Boston and then, by March of 1919, Felix O'Connell was to record his address as being Bonavista. Nothing further appears to have been documented a propos the *Jensen Camp*.

The son of Jeremiah Connell, farmer – to whom he had allotted a daily fifty cents from his pay - and of Susannah Connell (née *Mackey*, deceased of cancer on September 6, 1915) of Bonavista, he was also apparently brother to twelve siblings, two of whom, both boys, had died in infancy – Mary, John, Daniel and Edward-Augustus among them.

Felix O'Connell was reported to have passed away on December 8, 1920, perhaps in the sanatorium at Bonavista (Vital Statistics documents a Peter O'Connell having died of pulmonary tuberculosis there on that date).

It was not until November of 1925 that the Commonwealth Grave headstone was shipped to Bonavista.

Felix O'Connell had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-seven years and seven months; thus far, however, the exact date of his birth has proved to be elusive

Private Felix O'Connell was entitled to the British War Medal for his *overseas service*.



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 – March 11, 2023.