

Private Thomas Joseph O'Keefe (Regimental Number 923), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

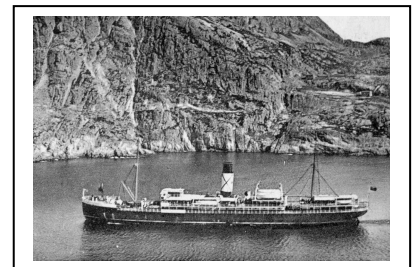


His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *sailor* earning a monthly forty dollars, Thomas Joseph O'Keefe presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland on the fifth day of January of the New Year, 1915. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

It was to be only a further three days following this medical assessment, on January 8, before he returned to the *C.L.B. Armoury* to thereupon be enlisted – engaged at the private soldier's rate of a single dollar per diem plus a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance*.

However, whereas attestation for others had come about on the day of enlistment, Thomas Joseph O'Keefe was now to another two weeks less a day, until January 21, before *that* final formality would come to pass.

Now there was to be yet a further eight weeks and two days before he would be summoned for *overseas service*. Where Private O'Keefe, Number 923, was to spend that time, or how he was to be occupied, has however not been recorded. Nor is it documented as to *where* he spent those several weeks: he may of course have returned temporarily to work – or simply to home, but that is only speculation.



(Right above: *The image of the Bowring Brothers' vessel 'Stephano', sister-ship of 'Florizel', passing through 'the Narrows' of St. John's Harbour is from Provincial Archives.*)

Unlike the two previous contingents to have departed Newfoundland (see below) for...*overseas service*, Private O'Keefe's 'D' Company was not to sail directly to the United Kingdom. On March 20, it embarked onto the Bowring-Brothers' vessel *Stephano* for the short voyage to Halifax, capital city of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, where it was thereupon to board a second vessel, the newly-launched *Orduña* for the trans-Atlantic crossing*.



(Right above: *The image of Orduna is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The vessel was not to be requisitioned during the Great War but would be used by the Cunard Company to operate on its commercial service between Liverpool and New York.*)

Having then sailed from Nova Scotia on March 22 for Liverpool, Private O’Keefe and his draft landed there eight days later, on the 30th. Once disembarked in Liverpool, the two-hundred fifty men and officers of ‘D’ Company were thereupon transported on the same date by train directly to Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, to join the Newfoundland Regiment’s ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ Companies.

These units were by this time stationed at the historic Castle, ‘A’ and ‘B’ having recently been posted from Fort George and ‘C’ having arrived directly from home (see further below). After ‘D’ Company’s arrival at the end of that month of March, the Newfoundlanders were now to remain at Edinburgh for the following six weeks.

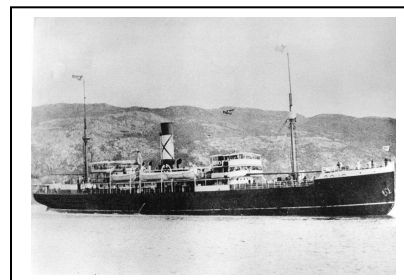


(Right above: *From its vantage point on Castle Hill, the venerable fortress overlooks the city of Edinburgh where in 1915 the Newfoundlanders were to provide the first garrison to be drawn from outside the British Isles. – photograph from 2011*)

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Five to six months before that time, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of some 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.



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

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



(continued)

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 ‘C’ Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent* - would arrive directly from Newfoundland.

**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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As seen in a previous paragraph, for the month of April and the first days of May of 1915, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ Companies, now united, were to furnish the garrison – the first troops from outside the British Isles to do so - of the guardian of Scotland’s capital city. Then, during the first week of May, ‘E’ Company was to report there...*to duty*...from home. Four days later again, on May 11, the Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

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

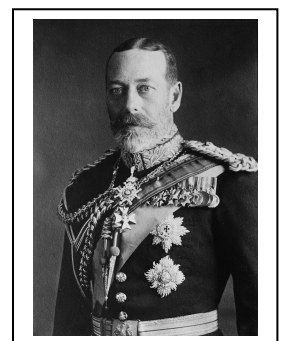
It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent would eventually receive the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland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



Meanwhile the two junior Companies, ‘E’ – 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.

(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.)

For reasons which are not apparent, Private O’Keefe was not among those who were posted to Aldershot, thence to Turkey, despite being a soldier of ‘D’ Company. Thus he made the short cross-country journey from *Stobs Camp* to *Ayr*.

At the end of this summer of 1915, the once-Royal Borough of *Ayr* on Scotland’s west coast was to begin to serve as 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*)



(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.

On November 14 of 1915, the 1st Re-enforcement Draft from *Ayr*, Private O’Keefe numbered among its ranks, passed through the English south-coast naval port of *Devonport* and boarded His Majesty’s Transport *Olympic*, sister ship of *Britannic* and the ill-starred *Titanic*. Although it was not acknowledged at the time, perhaps logically enough, the draft was being sent to re-enforce the failure of the *Gallipoli Campaign*, and more precisely, that of the *Suvla Bay* landing.



On December 1, having been transferred onto smaller craft at *Mudros Bay* in the Greek island of *Lemnos*, the *Newfoundlanders* from *Ayr* landed at *Suvla Bay* to report to duty with the *Newfoundland Battalion*. Some three weeks later, the British evacuated the place.

(Right above: *Olympic at right with Aquitania in the centre of the frame, anchored in Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915* – photograph from the *Imperial War Museum*, London)

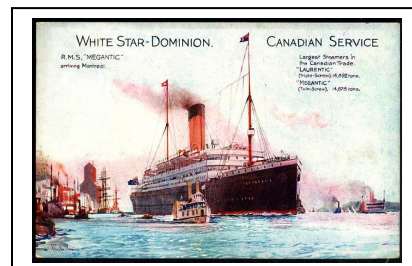
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(Right: Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to its departure to active service on the Gallipoli Peninsula – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)



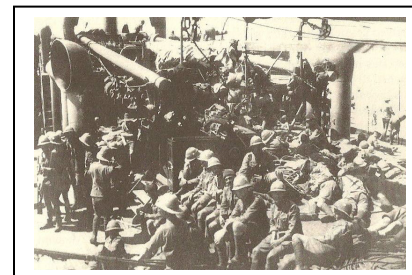
On August 20 of 1915, the Newfoundland Battalion had embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks. There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks 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: *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.*)



(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*)



(Right: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: either Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives*)

(Right: *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*)



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

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion were to serve but, even ever since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915 and even before - the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, had proved 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 the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.



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

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

**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.*



November 26 would see 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, were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

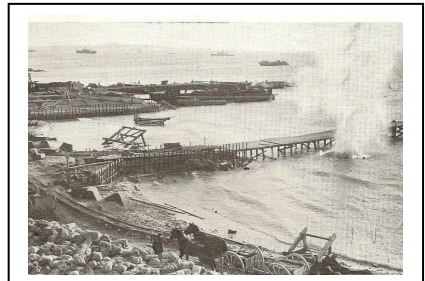
This, then, was the situation into which Private O'Keefe's re-enforcement draft from Ayr had stepped when it set foot, on December 1, onto the sand and stone of *Kangaroo Beach*.

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At *Suvla Bay*, the British positions were becoming more and more untenable and thus on the night of December 19-20, the area was abandoned – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.



Some of the Battalion personnel were to be evacuated to the nearby island of *Imbros*, some to *Lemnos*, further away; but in neither case would the respite 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 above: *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*)

(Preceding page: 'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – from Illustration)

The British, Indian and Anzac forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at Gallipoli – were by now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the Peninsula could be undertaken.

This final operation took 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.**



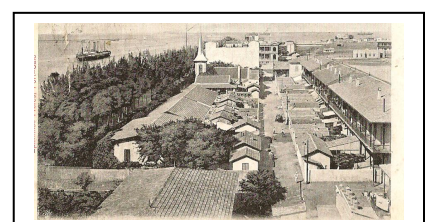
(Right: 'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011)

Immediately after the British evacuated the entire Gallipoli Peninsula in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, to arrive there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders would then immediately be transferred southward to the vicinity of Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.



***Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.**

(Right above: 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)



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



After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and other ranks of the 1st Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage through the Suez Canal en route to France.

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

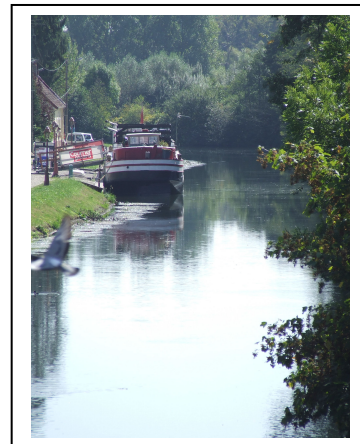
(Preceding page: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles.* – from a vintage post-card)

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 Marseilles. 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 over which they then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to have become a part of their history.

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



On April 13, the 1st Battalion 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*.

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



Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Maily-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be 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: *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)



(Right below: *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.*

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention* – from *Le Miroir*)



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 largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.

(Right: *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.



Private O'Keefe apparently was not to play a role with the Newfoundland Battalion on July 1 at Beaumont Hamel. The record shows that he had already been posted to the Divisional

Base Depot at Rouen on July 6, but for how long he had been there before that date is seemingly not to be found among his papers.

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

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On that same July 6, Private O’Keefe boarded HM Transport *Queen Alexandra* and returned from France to the United Kingdom: his *time* had expired*.

**He had enlisted for a single year as had all of the early recruits to the Regiment. Most of the others had already been prevailed upon to re-enlist for the duration of hostilities, but not Private Bennett. Therefore he was in theory free to return home to Newfoundland – but he got only as far as Ayr.*

(Right: The image of the Queen Alexandra is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. She was a new, fast vessel built in 1912 to replace a previous ship of the same name and was requisitioned in 1915 to be a troop-carrier. She operated between England and France and on May 9, 1918, rammed and sank a German U-boat off the French coast near Cherbourg. She survived the Great War, served as an accommodation ship in the Second, and was finally taken out of service in 1958.)

Upon arrival in England he was transferred north to Scotland, to the Regimental Depot at Ayr to await passage home. There the recruiting officers presumably did their job because, on July 17, Private O’Keefe elected to re-enlist*. He nevertheless did not return immediately to the 1st Battalion, but remained at Ayr for the next twenty-four weeks.

**It was not an easy decision for those in Private Bennett’s position to make. Many of these young soldiers from Newfoundland were irreplaceable fishermen whose families were absolutely dependent on them and whose service in the Army increased hardship on those at home. The position in which the death of one of these men left those dependent on them, is literally beyond description and to judge them as cowards or shirkers, as has been done, shows only an ignorance by these critics of Newfoundland’s history.*

(Right above: 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: a part of the original grandstand survives. – photo from 2012)

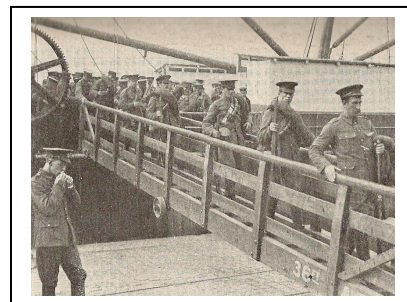
On December 30 of 1916, the 16th Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr, Private O’Keefe a soldier of that detachment, embarked in the English south-coast port of Southampton en route to the large British Expeditionary Base at Rouen, the capital city of Normandy.

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The contingent disembarked there on the following day, New Year's Eve, thereupon making its way to the Base Depot for organizing and for final training* before setting off to a rendezvous with the Newfoundland Battalion.

(Right: *British troops disembark at Rouen en route 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, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.

The Regimental War Diary records a draft of fifty-one *other ranks* – Private O'Keefe among its numbers – reporting *to duty* on January 17 while the 1st Battalion was spending the night at *Carnoy Camp*, during its march back to the area of the front.

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In the meantime, early during the period of Private O'Keefe's absence from the Newfoundland Battalion, it had fought on that catastrophic first day of...*First Somme* (see further above).

After those 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 a 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.



It had then been 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 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 having arrived, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14th of July, 1916, the 1st Battalion still numbered only...*11 officers and 260 rifles*...after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

On July 27-28 of 1916, the 1st Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong, even after further re-enforcement – had moved north and entered into the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

It 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.

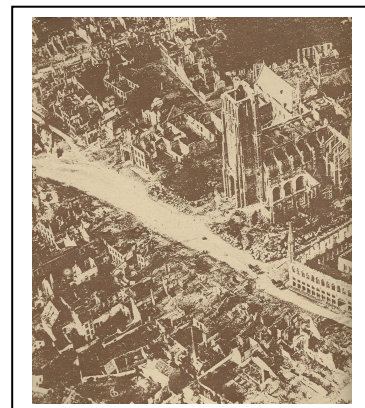
(Right: *The entrance to ‘A’ Company’s quarters – obviously renovated since that time - in the ramparts of the city of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



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 incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

Then on October 8, after having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the Newfoundland Battalion had been ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.

(Right: *An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the ‘Ville morte’.* – from *Illustration*)



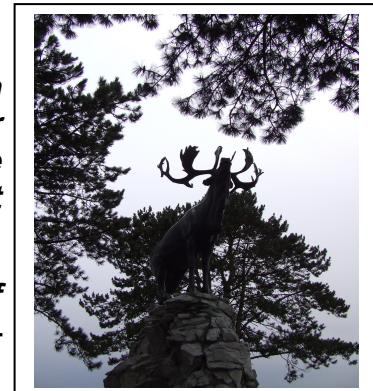
Four days after that return to France, on October 12, 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to the offensive; it was to be at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.

The encounter had proved 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)



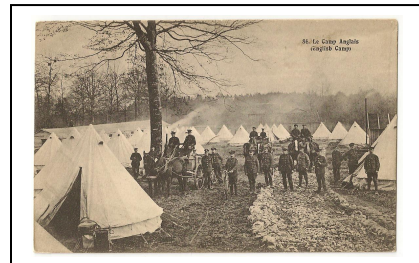
The Newfoundland Battalion was not to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it would supply two-hundred fifty men to act as stretcher-bearers in an attack undertaken by troops of two British regiments, the Hampshires and the Worcestershires, of the 88th Brigade.

(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*)



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

The Newfoundlanders were now to spend two weeks withdrawn to the area of Ville-sous-Corbie, re-enforcing and reorganizing. It was not to be until November 15 that the 1st Battalion began to wend its way back up to the front lines.



There it continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period broken only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas period, encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.

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

It had been on January 11 that the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered out of *Corps Reserve* and its lodgings at *Camps en Amienois* from where it would make its way on foot to the community of Airaines. From the railway station there it was to entrain for the small town of Corbie where it had thereupon taken over billets which it had already occupied for a short period only two months before.

After that recent six-week Christmas respite spent in *Corps Reserve* far to the rear, the Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to *active service* on January 23 – by this time having been re-joined by Private O’Keefe - although they apparently had already returned to the trenches by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917. They were to serve in and out of the trenches in the area for the next two months but there would be no infantry action until the very end of February.

However, the artillery of both sides was to be active.

The son of John O’Keefe – also found as simply *Keefe* - (former fisherman, deceased August 15, 1904) and of Esther O’Keefe (née *Sweeney*, later married to Edward Clow) – to whom he had willed his everything - of Ferryland, he was brother to Mary-Jane, Theresa, Daniel-Joseph, Leo and Lucy, and step-brother to James, Daniel, Edward and Fred.



(Right above: *Guillemont Road Cemetery and the countryside around Guillemont – albeit in summertime - where Private O’Keefe was killed in action. – photograph from 2010*)

Private O'Keefe was reported as having been *killed in action* on January 28, 1917, in the trenches while serving with Number 6 Platoon of 'C' Company. His death came as the result of the enemy bombardment of the evening before, of the Battalion positions near the village of Guillemont in the French *Département de la Somme*.

At home it was the Reverend L.K. Vereker who was requested to bear the news to his family.

Thomas Joseph O'Keefe had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-one years: date of birth in Ferryland, Newfoundland, October 23, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Private Thomas Joseph O'Keefe was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



These interesting documents are to be found in the records:

Excerpt from correspondence from Newfoundland Regiment Pay Department, dated February 13:-

Your Excellency:-

I have the honour to call your attention to the following irregularity.

Code telegram from Capt. Timewell, No.484, Sep. 15th. 1916 reads:-

“following deserters.....

923 O'Keefe.”

Casualty list posted February 10th. 1917, reads:-

“Following killed in action January 28th.

923 Pte. Thomas J. O'Keefe January 28th, Ferryland.

There is no record here of this man having rejoined the regiment, and the allotment formerly paid to his mother at Ferryland was cancelled from Sep. 1st. 1916 on receipt of the above mentioned cable.

On instructions from Finance Committee, I have cabled Major Timewell, as follows:-

(continued)

“Your cable fifteen September last states nine two three O’Keefe deserter. Casualty list February tenth reports killed in action. Explanation desired.”

Code Telegram
From Major Timewell (rec’d 16 Feb 1917)

Following for Howley:

Your telegram 13th Feb: 923 O’Keefe was reported deserter* Sept 5. Subsequently rejoined 2nd Battalion proceeding to BEF December 30th as notified to Officer Commanding Headquarters St. John’s and Colonial Secretary by mail as of January 2nd and my letter 25th Jan.**

O’Keefe KIA Jan 28 (1917)

**Yet his pay continued uninterrupted until at least 28/1/17, the date of his death, and his charge sheet remains blank after 1/8/16.*

***Another source says September 15*

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 8, 2023.