

Private James Joseph O'Leary (Regimental Number 391), 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-maker* working at the *Newfoundland Boot and Shoe* factory on Water Street for twelve dollars per week, James Joseph O'Leary presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on August 28 of 1914 – just three weeks and three days after the *Declaration of War* – for a medical examination. It was an exercise which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

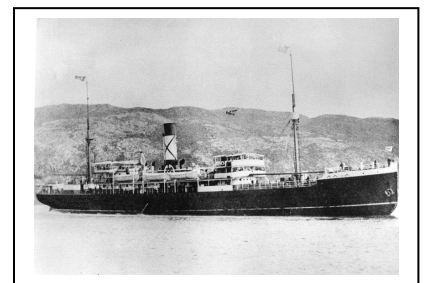
Ten days later, on September 7, James O'Leary returned to the *C.L.B. Armoury*, on this second occasion for enlistment, whereupon he was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*. A recruit of the First Draft, he was likely now ordered to the tented area by that time established on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the East End of St. John's where a four-five week course of training was already under way.

The regimental authorities were *also* busy by now, preparing for the transport of this, the first body of volunteers, to *overseas* - and later to *active* – *service*.

At the beginning of the month of October a large number of the new recruits underwent attestation; Private O'Leary was one of that number, taking his oath of allegiance on the first day of October.

Two days later, after the Newfoundland contingent – it was not as yet a battalion – of 'A' and 'B' Companies had paraded through the city, it embarked onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* which was awaiting in St. John's Harbour.

Private O'Leary and his comrades-in-arms of the *First Five Hundred* – also to be known to history as the *Blue Puttees* – were now to sit on board ship for the best part of a day as it was not to be until the morrow that *Florizel* would sail to the south coast of the Island and to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the Canadian Division to the United Kingdom.



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

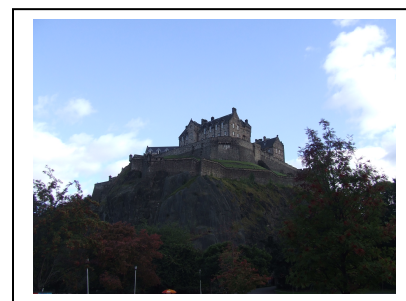
(Right below: Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011)

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- where he was appointed *Regimental Shoemaker* in November of 1914 before requesting a reversion to *the ranks* two months later; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; and lastly at Edinburgh Castle where the unit was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.



(Right below: The venerable Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011)

Some three months later, on May 11, and some seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit – by now ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies re-enforced by ‘C’, ‘D’, and ‘E’ - was ordered moved from the Scottish capital 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 received 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 ready to be ordered on ‘*active service*’.

***The number was about fifteen hundred, sufficient to provide four ‘fighting’ companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.**

(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)

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ – Private O’Leary among their ranks - 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.

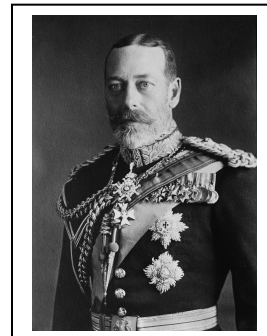


This force, now designated as the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

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Meanwhile the two junior companies, the later-arrived 'E' and the aforementioned last-arrived 'F', were ordered transferred to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

(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.)



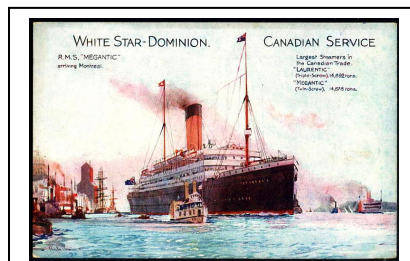
It was also during this period while at Aldershot that on August 13 Private O'Leary was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion for the duration of the war*.

*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 a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was likely to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.

(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.)



While 'E' and 'F' Companies were beginning their posting to the Regimental Depot at Ayr, on August 20 of 1915 the 1st Battalion embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Plymouth-Devonport onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks.

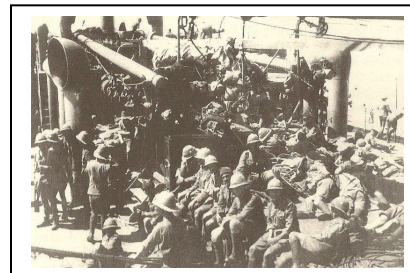


(Right above: The image of *Megantic*, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the *Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*.)

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: *Kangaroo Beach*, where the officers and men of the 1st Battalion, 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)



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(Preceding page: Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli – Dardanelles to the French, Çanakkale to the Turks. – 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 landed from their transport ship at Suvla Bay on that September night of 1915 they would disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to 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 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 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; a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm was to 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.



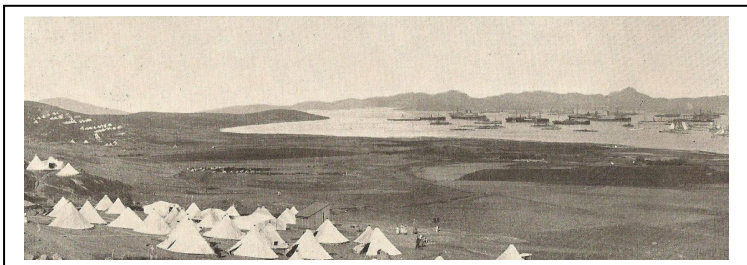
(Right: No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from Provincial Archives)

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Private O'Leary was one of those. He was admitted into the 26th Casualty Clearing Station at *Suvla Bay* suffering from the aforesaid frostbite and trench-foot on December 4 and from there was evacuated on the following day for further treatment, to the 16th Stationary Hospital at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos.

(Right: A goodly number of Allied medical facilities, the majority of them under canvas, almost entirely encircle a congested Mudros Bay and its minuscule harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos during the autumn of 1915 – from *Illustration*)



From Mudros, Private O'Leary was invalided to the United Kingdom on His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Aquitania*, the vessel to sail some three weeks after his arrival on the island, on December 26, Boxing Day, of 1916.

(Right: A view of some of the *Aquitania's* peace-time facilities in use as hospital wards – from a print originally from the *Cunard Archives*)

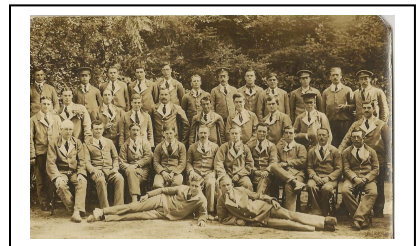


On January 3 of the New Year, 1916, having arrived back in England, Private O'Leary was transferred from the ship and admitted into the 3rd London General Hospital in the Borough of Wandsworth. He would remain there for only a brief ten days.

(Right: The main building of what was to become the 3rd London General Hospital during the Great War had been originally opened, on July 1st of 1859, as a home for the orphaned daughters of British soldiers, sailors and marines. – photograph from 2010)

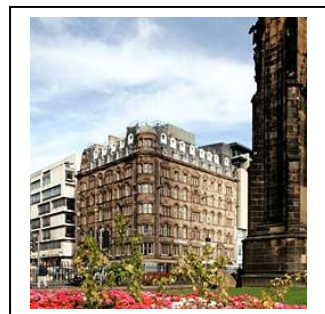


(Right: A party of Newfoundland patients dressed in hospital uniform, here seen convalescing in the grounds of the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)



On January 13 of the New Year, 1916, Private O'Leary was discharged and granted the customary ten-day furlough accorded those military personnel released from hospital. Immediately following this leave, those ten days spent at the *Waverley Hotel* in Edinburgh, Private O'Leary was posted to the Regimental Depot where he reported to duty on January 22.

(Right: the *Waverley Hotel* in Edinburgh where, during the period of the Great War, service personnel received very favourable rates – photograph from *Wikipedia*(?))



At the end of the 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*)



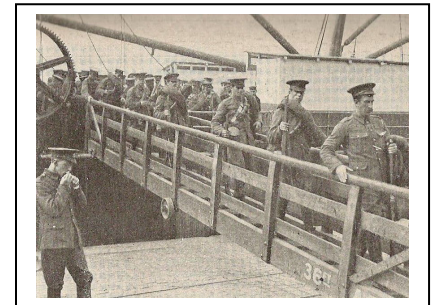
(Right: *The High Street in Ayr as shown on a postcard of the time, the imposing Wallace Tower – it stands to this day (2017) - dominating the scene – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo.*

On March 28 of 1916, the 3rd Re-enforcement Draft dispatched from Ayr – Private O'Leary among its ranks - embarked in the English south-coast port-city of Southampton onto His Majesty's Transport *Archangel* for the short voyage across the English Channel to the Norman capital city of Rouen where the vessel docked on the 30th.



(Right above: *The image of a troop-laden Archangel is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

The contingent then proceeded to the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot nearby. There the detachment underwent final training and organization* before moving on to its rendezvous with the parent unit.



(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.*

Some two weeks later, a draft of two officers and two-hundred eleven *other ranks* from Rouen – Private O'Leary again one of that number - reported to *duty* with the Newfoundland Battalion on April 15 in the village of Englebelmer some three kilometres behind the front lines in the *Département de la Somme*.

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While Private O’Leary was to be receiving medical attention during the months of December and January, on the *Gallipoli Peninsula* things had been going from bad to worse.

On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard. Some of the Battalion personnel were to be 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 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*)

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



This final operation would take place on the night of January

8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the British rear-guard on this second occasion also.

(Right above: *‘W’ Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – from Illustration*)



**Lieutenant Owen Steele of St. John’s, Newfoundland, is cited as having been the last soldier of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to step into the final small boat to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

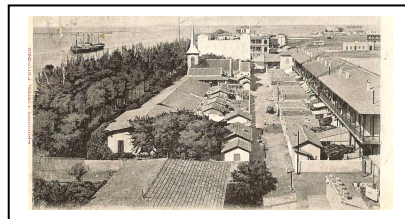
(Right above: *‘W’ Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

Immediately after the British had 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 had then been immediately 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.***

(Preceding page: 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 as it was just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

After that 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 through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders had disembarked eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of *Marseilles*, on March 22.



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

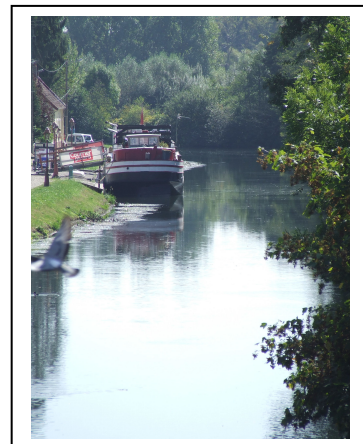
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train had arrived at the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably travelled 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 had 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 had subsequently marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where it would be billeted, would receive reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time,



would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

And this occasion had been, as seen in a previous paragraph, that on which Private O’Leary and his draft from Rouen had reported *to duty* with the parent Newfoundland Battalion.

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

(Right: 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.

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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, just as depressing, the carnage of *the Somme* would 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.



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

The son of Philip O'Leary, a former shoe-maker, deceased in September of 1907, and of Catherine O'Leary of 21, Scott Street in St. John's, James Joseph O'Leary was a widower – his wife apparently also deceased in 1907 - citing a daughter, Kitty (*Catherine*), seven years of age in 1914, as a dependent as well as his widowed mother.



Private O'Leary was reported as *missing in action* at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'B' Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*. Some six months later, on December 31, 1916, he was officially *presumed dead*.

James Joseph O'Leary was a *declared* thirty-two years of age at the time of his enlistment: possible date of birth – also see below* – April 27, 1879.

**Philip Leary and Catherine Dunne married on October 17, 1876, and were to have four children: Catherine-Ann (born 1877), James (1879 and see above), Mary-Joseph (1881) and Patrick (1883). Catherine O'Leary, widow, at the time of the 1921 Census was living on Scott's Street aged seventy years, in the company of a younger Catherine born in 1905.*

Private James Joseph O'Leary 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).



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 10, 2023.