



Private Joseph Olsen (Regimental Number 313) is buried in Tank Cemetery, Guemappe – Grave reference A. 16.

His employment prior to his military service recorded as that of a *teamster* employed by *Harvey & Company* of Water Street, and working for a wage of eight dollars a week, Joseph Olsen 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 September 1 of 1914, four weeks less a day after the *Declaration of War*.

(continued)

The medical procedure having pronounced him as being...*fit for foreign service*...Joseph Olsen then enlisted at the same venue a week later – at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 (ten cents of which was a *field allowance*) - on September 8: a recruit of the First Draft.

Some three weeks later again – having trained during that interim period - Private Olsen attested on October 3 before later on that same date proceeding to embark with the other personnel of the *First Five Hundred* onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting the contingent 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 sailed on the morrow to its rendezvous off the south coast of the Island where she was to join the convoy transporting the 1st Canadian Division across the Atlantic.

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

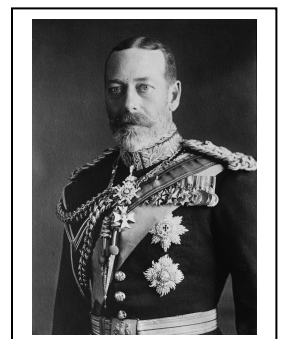
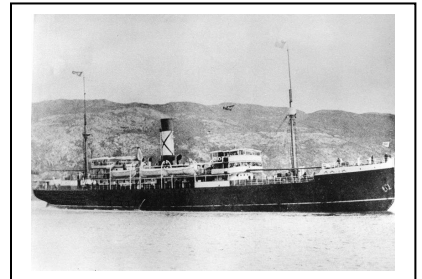
In the United Kingdom Private Olsen trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; at Edinburgh Castle – where it provided the first garrison from outside the British Isles; and later again at the tented *Stobs Camp* near the town of Hawick to the south-east of Edinburgh.

(Right above: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be 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', were then sent south to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot; meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived 'E' and 'F*', were sent to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, where they were 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 – photograph from Bain News Services via Wikipedia*)

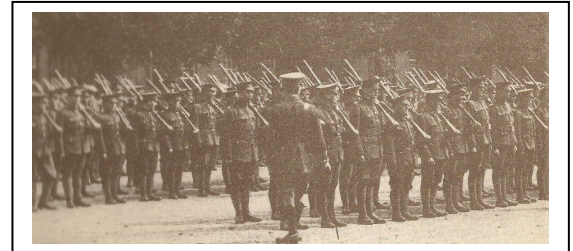
**On July 10, 1915, 'F' Company had arrived at Stobs Camp from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service.*



The 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

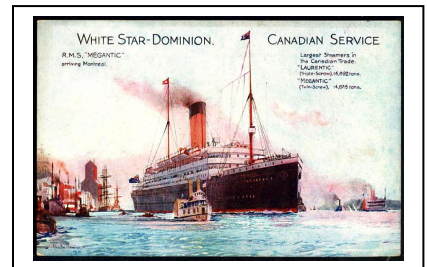
It had then been during the period spent at Aldershot that Private Olsen of 'B' Company – he was not alone in doing so - had been prevailed upon, he on August 14, to re-enlist for the duration of the war*.

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



(Right above: Some of the men of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915 – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)

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

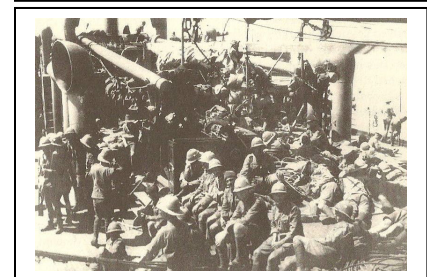


***It is perhaps worthy of note that during this ten-month period spent in the United Kingdom, Private Olsen had thirty-seven offences recorded on his disciplinary record. Apart from having been fined on several occasions, he was also either in detention or confined to quarters for a total of one-hundred thirty-one days. The problems continued later while on active service in Cairo, Suez and Rouen.**

On August 20, 1915, Private Olsen and his comrades-in-arms 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 where, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, he disembarked with the 1st Battalion 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)



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

A month after his arrival there, Private Olsen was admitted into the 88th Field Ambulance at *Suvla Bay* on October 23, suffering from influenza. Apparently it was a mild case as he would be released on that same day and returned *to duty* with his 1st Battalion.

(Right below: *A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where the 1st Battalion was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011*)

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, would prove 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.



Thus it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

(Right: *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.*



On the night of December 19-20, the British abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, formed a part of the rear-guard – and the 1st Battalion was transferred two days later to Cape Helles on the western tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

(Right: *Cape Helles as seen from the Turkish positions on the misnamed Achi Baba, positions which were never breached. The Newfoundland positions were to the right-hand side of the picture. – photograph from 2011*)



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

When the British evacuated the entire Gallipoli Peninsula in January of 1916, 1st Battalion had been sent to Alexandria, arriving there on the 15th of that month. From there the Newfoundlanders were transferred, almost immediately, south to Suez at the end of the Canal of the same name.



(continued)

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



At that time it would seem that the future posting of the Newfoundland unit's parent (British) 29th Division was still uncertain. Bulgaria had lately entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika (north-eastern Greece) was soon to become a theatre of war.

However, it was soon determined that the services of the 29th Division were required on the *Western Front*.

(Right: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Newfoundlanders, employed as the rear-guard, were among the last to leave on two occasions.* – photograph taken from the battleship *Cornwallis* from *Illustration*)



(Right: *Port Tewfiq before the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)



On March 14, the some six-hundred officers and men of Private Olsen's Newfoundland Battalion embarked through Port Tewfiq at the southern end of the *Suez Canal* onto His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* for the voyage to the French port of Marseilles, en route to the *Western Front*.

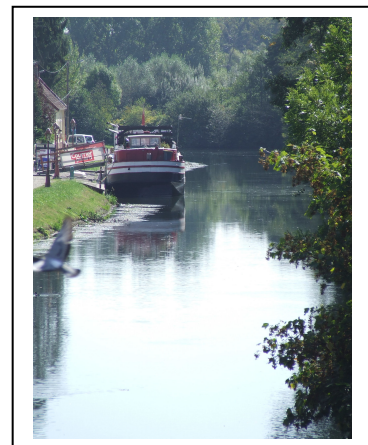


(Right: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles.* – from a vintage post-card)

Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Battalion's train arrived at the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for them travelling unused in a separate wagon. De-training at the station at two in the morning the Newfoundlanders still had a long march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

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

It is doubtful that any of those tired soldiers paid much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge that they passed on their way from the station. Some three months later *the Somme* would be a part of their history.



On April 13, the 1st Battalion entered into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy – where it would be billeted, would welcome reinforcements two days later on the 15th, and, on that same day, would be introduced into the British lines of the *Western Front*, there to be put to work to improve the communication trenches.

Just days later, two of the four Companies – ‘A’, and ‘B’, that of Private Olsen – were to take over several support positions from a British unit* before the entire Newfoundland unit was then to move further up into forward positions on the *Western Front* for the first time, 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 the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.*

The Newfoundlanders were also soon to be preparing for the British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for that same meandering river, *the Somme*.

(Right: A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))



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It was later on during this period, on June 24, a day after the Newfoundland Battalion had retired from the forward area to billets in Louvencourt, that Private Olsen was sent to the 29th Divisional Rest Station suffering from *orchitis* (inflammation of the testes). He is recorded in his personal documentation as having returned to *duty* twelve days later, on July 6, 1916, only days after the devastation of Beaumont-Hamel. It was on this date that the 1st Battalion – the Regimental War Diary entry of that day recording a strength of only one hundred sixty-eight *other ranks** - moved out of the trenches, to withdraw some three kilometres back to the village of Englebelmer.

**British establishment battalion strength was normally about a total of one thousand in its four fighting companies plus a headquarters staff.*

* * * * *

If there is one name and date in Newfoundland history which is etched in the collective once-national memory, it is that of Beaumont-Hamel on July 1 of 1916; and if any numbers are remembered they are those of the eight-hundred who went *over the top* in the third wave of the attack on that morning, and of the sixty-eight unwounded present at muster some twenty-four hours later*.



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**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.*

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

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 butchery 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 & 2015*)

In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was a commune – it still exists today – at the time comprising two communities: Beaumont, a village on the German side of the lines, and Hamel which was behind those of the British. No-Man's-Land, on which the Newfoundland Memorial Park lies partially today, was on land that separated Beaumont from Hamel.



After the events of the morning of July 1, 1916, such had then been the dire condition of the attacking British forces that it had been feared that 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, as seen above, 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 Maily-Maillet.

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(Preceding page: *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 – reported *to duty*. They were to be 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 – even now under battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong after still further re-enforcement – 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 above: *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*)

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

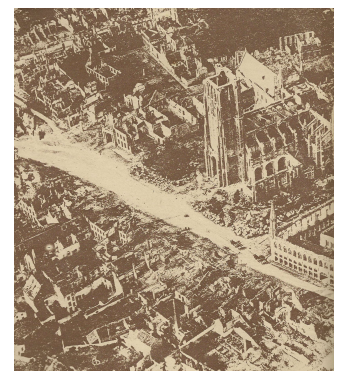
The Salient – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders' posting there; yet they nonetheless incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

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

(Right: *Canadian trenches at Sanctuary Wood: they are about a kilometre from the Newfoundland positions of September, 1916, at Railway Wood in the Ypres Salient, but of course almost a century later. – photograph from 2010*)

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

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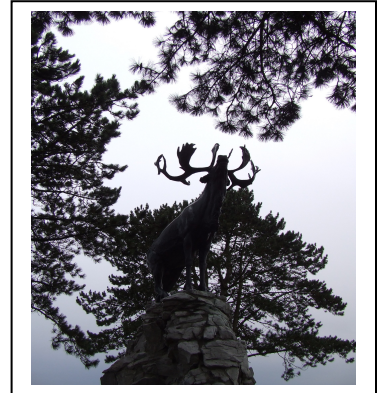


The encounter proved to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred and thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain. There being no evidence to the contrary, it must be assumed that Private Olsen was there to play his anonymous role.

(Right: *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)

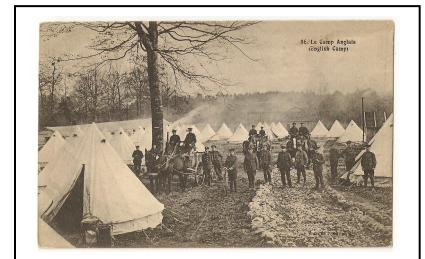


(Right: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's advance of October 12, 1916.* – photograph from 2012)



In the period after the confrontation at Gueudecourt, the Newfoundland Battalion had continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period to be broken only by the several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas period of that 1916. It was a time during which the Regimental personnel was to be encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.

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

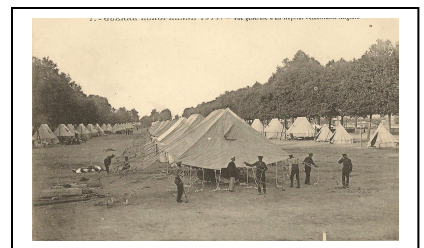


After that welcome six-week Christmas respite spent in *Corps Reserve* well to the rear, the Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to *active service* on January 23, although they had apparently already returned to the trenches by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

* * * * *

Some two weeks after his Battalion's return to action after the Christmas pause, Private Olsen was admitted into 34th Casualty Clearing Station at Daours on February 6 of 1917. He was suffering from tonsillitis and was transferred to the 1st Australian General Hospital at Rouen on the 8th, two days later, for further treatment. Posted to the Base Depot at Rouen on February 21, he then re-joined the 1st Battalion which was at the time being billeted for two nights in the village of Vignacourt, on March 31.

(Right: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature.* - from a vintage post-card)



Private Olsen was one of the re-enforcement draft of five officers and thirty-two *other ranks* which reported from Rouen to duty on that day.

(Right: *Vignacourt at the time of the Great War* – by courtesy of the internet site of the *Australian War Memorial*)



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Meanwhile, during Private Olsen's absence due to his medical woes, the Newfoundland Battalion had remained in the area of *the Somme*, even though the offensive had officially terminated, of course, in mid-November of the preceding year *.

**The final assault of the battle had been the capture on November 15 of Beaumont by the British 51st (Highland) Division. The village had been one of the objectives of the attack of July 1, 1916.*

The only infantry activity to directly involve the 1st Battalion during that entire winter period – from the action at Gueudecourt in mid-October of 1916, until Monchy-le-Preux in April of 1917 – was to be the sharp engagement at Sailly-Saillisel at the end of February and beginning of March, an action which would bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.



(Right above: *The fighting during the time of the Battalion's posting to Sailly-Saillisel took place on the far side of the village which was no more than a heap of rubble at the time.* - photograph from 2009(?))

After Sailly-Saillisel the month of March had been a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they had now spent their time near the communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and training for upcoming events. They even had had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.



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

On March 29, the 1st Battalion had begun to make its way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond. The march was to finish amid the rubble of a village called Monchy-le-Preux.



On its way it had been billeted in the community of Vignacourt which was where, on the last day of March, Private Olsen had re-joined his unit.

(Preceding page: *The remnants of the Grande Place of the city of Arras in early 1916 after some eighteen months of bombardment – from Illustration*)

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(Right below: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood on Vimy Ridge since 1936 – photograph from 2010*)

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a major French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties this attack was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, its only positive episode to be the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday, 1917.



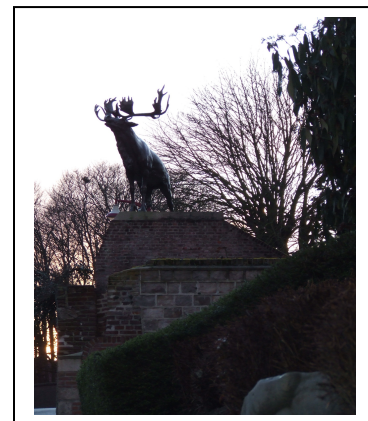
While the British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, the French *Bataille du Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

The 1st Battalion was to play its part during the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at the place called Monchy-le-Preux on April 14 and which would finish ten days later, on April 23, perhaps a kilometre distant, at *Les Fosses Farm*. After Beaumont-Hamel, the ineptly-planned action at Monchy-le-Preux would prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war, four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone*.



**It was also an action in which a DSO, an MC and eight MMs were won by a small group of nine personnel of the Battalion – the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) awarded to the unit's Commanding officer. An MM for the same action was also presented to a private from the Essex Regiment .*

(Right above: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen today from the western – in 1917, the British – side of the community: The Newfoundlanders advanced, out of the ruins of the place, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)



The son of Charles Olsen, labourer with the *City Works*, and of Annie Olsen (née *Price*) – to whom he had allotted a monthly sixteen dollars from his pay - of 87, Signal Hill Road, St. John's – he was also brother to Charles Jr*, Annie, Emma, Walter, Frank and likely also Bertha-Isabella, George-Eric-Laurence, William-Peter and to Charles-Eric (died aged two years)**.

**He was lost in March of 1914 in the 'Newfoundland' disaster.*

***These final five require some confirmation.*

(Preceding page: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands in the centre of the re-built village atop the vestiges of a German strong-point. – photograph from 2012*)

Private Olsen was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 14, 1917, while serving with 'B' Company in the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux during the *Battle of Arras**.

**The date of his death has in at least one report in his dossier been documented as April 23, the day of the fighting at Les Fosses Farm.*

Joseph Olsen had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years. *Ancestry.ca* simply records the year of birth as 1895.

(Right: *A family memorial commemorating the sacrifice of Private Olsen stands in the Old Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road in St. John's. – photograph from 2015*)

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

(continued on following page)



87 Signal Hill Rd.,
St. John's,
May 27/20

Dept. of Militia
City

Dear Sirs:

The 1914-1915 Star received in December last, and as that was the only recompense offered me for the loss of my boy I did not think it worth acknowledging. No Pension, no Separation Allowance, only a mere sixteen dollars (16.00) a month from the time he enlisted to December last. I valued my son too much to accept a paltry bronze medal as a compensation for his death.

Yours truly,
Mrs. Charles Olsen

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 12, 2023.