



Private Ruben (also found as *Reuben*) Osborne (Regimental Number 3421) – often reported in his files as *Osmond* - is interred in Birr Crossroads Cemetery: Grave reference, II. A. 6..

His occupation prior to enlistment recorded as that of a fisherman, Ruben Osborne was a recruit of the Eleventh Draft. He presented himself for medical examination on January 15 of the New Year, 1917, at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury\** in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. 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, January 15, and at the same venue, that Ruben Osbourne 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 then came to pass, while still at the **CLB Armoury** on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On that same fifteenth day of the New Year he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, Ruben Osbourne became...*a soldier of the King.*

There were now to pass nine weeks less two days after his attestation before Private Osbourne, Number 3421, would be a soldier of the contingent of one-hundred four *other ranks* to leave St. John's on March 17, St. Patrick's Day of 1917, for the journey to Halifax.

How he was to spend this prolonged interval after his attestation appears not to have been documented. It may be that he was to return temporarily to work and was perhaps to spend time at his family home in the Burin Peninsula community of Grand Bank but, of course he may well have chosen – or more likely *been chosen* - to remain in barracks in St. John's, even though there was apparently little in the way of military training to be undertaken\*.

***\*A number of the recruits, those whose home was not in St. John's or close to the capital city, or those who had no friends or family to offer them board and lodging, were to be quartered in the curling rink in the area of Fort William in St. John's, a building which was at the time to serve as barracks.***

After those several weeks since January 15 having come to a conclusion, the means of Private Osbourne's departure from Newfoundland, however, is not clear: in one source, *The Fighting Newfoundlander*, the claim is that it was on board the Bowring Brothers vessel *Florizel*; the files of the soldiers themselves record that it was...*Embarked S.S. Train to Halifax 17/3/17*...presumably as far as Port-aux-Basques and thence by ferry and train again to Halifax.

Other available sources have not proved conclusively helpful.

Whatever the case, it was to be from Halifax that the Newfoundland detachment made its trans-Atlantic crossing in the company of a number of Canadian troops: a Heavy Artillery draft; an Infantry Battalion and an Infantry draft; and also the Number 1 Jewish Reinforcement Draft\*.

(continued)

The Newfoundlanders joined their Canadian comrades-in-arms on board His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie*, and sailed from Nova Scotia on March 28. Thus this draft was to reach the United Kingdom two weeks or so before the ill-fated *Windsor Draft*\*\* which had left Newfoundland at the end of January, ten weeks earlier.

*\*Extracted from a Canadian Government File entitled... 'Reserve Battalions': On 26 July 1916 Captain Isadore Freedman of the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught's Royal Canadian Hussars was authorized to raise a draft of 5 lieutenants and 250 other ranks from among Jews in Montreal who were British subjects...*



*...Authorization published in General Order 11 of 1 February 1917.*

*Having travelled to the United Kingdom as recorded above, this draft was absorbed by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Reserve Battalion in England. Only a month later, this unit was re-designated as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion (199<sup>th</sup> Duchess of Connaught's Own Irish Canadian Rangers) from whose ranks were to be dispatched re-enforcements to the Canadian battalions on the Western Front, primarily the 87<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion and the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles.*

*The Jewish Re-enforcement Draft likely received some welcome publicity at the time of its formation and its departure overseas, but it nonetheless was eventually dispersed on the battle-fields of Europe in the same manner as other Canadian troops.*

*(Right above: The image of Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. A new vessel built in 1914, she was a ship of the Canadian Pacific (Railway) Company. Although she was very often to carry troops from Canada to the United Kingdom, she would not be requisitioned as a troop transport, but had continued to ply her commercial routes. On September 9 of 1918, during a crossing from Liverpool to New York, Missanabie was torpedoed and sunk off the coast of Ireland with the loss of forty-five lives.)*

*\*\*This was the name given to the draft of about three-hundred twenty all ranks which had left St. John's on January 31, 1917, en route to Halifax from where they were to sail to the United Kingdom. This contingent would eventually make that voyage, but about thirteen weeks later than envisaged. They were quarantined at Windsor as the result of a measles and mumps epidemic that claimed two of their number – and maybe a later third.*

*Missanabie having docked in Liverpool on April 6, the Newfoundland contingent thereupon entrained for the west coast of Scotland.*

\* \* \* \* \*

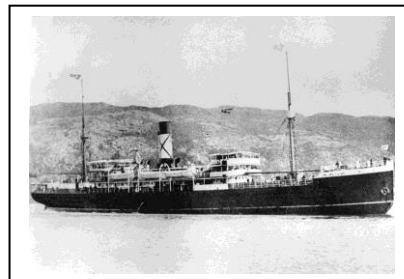
Some two years and six months prior to that month of April of 1917 when Private Osbourne was to find himself in Scotland, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits had undergone a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* 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 had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

(Right below: *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 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

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.



(Preceding page: *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*.

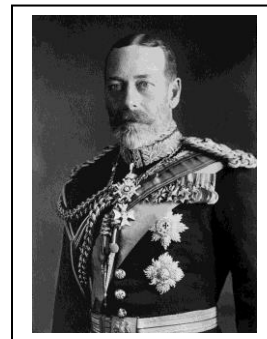
This had been an all-important moment: the Company's arrival was to bring the Newfoundland Regiment's numbers up to some fifteen hundred, establishment strength\* of a battalion which could be posted on...active service.



*\*A number sufficient for four 'fighting' companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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

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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, had been transferred to *Aldershot Camp* in southern England.



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*.

(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 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 soon to be formed 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment.



(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 Burgh, 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.*



(continued)

*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.*

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

That November 15 of 1915 was to see not only the departure of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> day of the month the new-comers, formerly 'C' Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 on *Olympic* from Halifax via Liverpool and yet a further one-hundred eighty-five at the end of May but the number of potential recruits to be found in Newfoundland was by now diminishing.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was to be only a single exception to the above sequence of departures of re-enforcement contingents from Newfoundland and their arrival at the Regimental Depot in Scotland and that was the draft in which Private Osbourne was a soldier. Because of the quarantine in Windsor, Nova Scotia, imposed upon those who had sailed from home on January 31 of 1917, the subsequent contingent, comprising for the most part the Eleventh Recruitment Draft which had left Newfoundland's shores in mid-March, had thus leap-frogged the *Windsor Draft* to dock in Liverpool and report to Ayr three weeks and two days ahead of it.

By this time the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment serving on the Continent, particularly after the fighting of April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux (see further below), was becoming critically short of personnel and the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion at Ayr was becoming hard-pressed to find replacements for these losses.

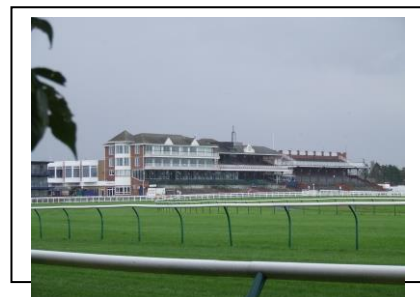
\* \* \* \* \*

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 2<sup>nd</sup> (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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.



(Right above: *Wellington Square seen here almost a century after it hosted the officers of the Newfoundland Regiment – photograph from 2012*)

(Right: *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.

Surely because of the dearth of available re-enforcements at this time, it appears that those regulation fourteen weeks of training were at this time to be reduced by some fifty per-cent. Thus Private Osbourne was to spend only *eight* weeks in Scotland before being ordered to *active service* on the Western Front.

(Right: A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009)



On June 3, 1917, the 24<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr – Private Osbourne among its *other ranks* - passed through the English Channel port of Folkestone on its way to France. Only hours later on the same day it disembarked in Boulogne, and entrained south to Rouen where time was spent at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot, for final training and organization\* before moving onward to its eventual rendezvous with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.



(Right: The French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

*\*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, Étaples, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*



(Right: British troops disembark at Rouen at an earlier time of the Great War on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration)

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Private Osborne, one of a contingent of one-hundred eighteen *other ranks* dispatched from Rouen, reported...*to duty*...to the parent unit on June 19, in the community of Bonneville. The unit had been billeted there two weeks less a day before the arrival of these re-enforcements where for once – according to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary – there had been no particular work or training to report.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time of that June of 1917, the first contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment had already been serving overseas for some two years and eight months. The 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve)



Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had been formed – in the spring of 1916 - and multiple drafts had been dispatched from Ayr to supplement the strength of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment (see immediately below).

(Right: *Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.)*



As for Ruben Osbourne, by that June 19, 1917, he had been a soldier of the Newfoundland Regiment for one-hundred fifty-five days.

The four senior companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', had become in the summer of 1915 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment and had thereupon been attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (*British*) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. The force had soon been dispatched from *Camp Aldershot* to...*active service*.

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.



(Right: *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: *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)*



Having then disembarked in Alexandria and subsequently spent some two weeks billeted in the British Abassia Barracks and an encampment in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, after a further week's journey, was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

(Right: *'Kangaroo Beach', where the officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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)*



(continued)

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



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

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion would now 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 been proving 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 their allies, the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

*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.*

(Right: This is Anzac Bay in the fore-ground with the Salt Lake in the centre further away. The bottom of Suvla Bay is just to be seen on the left and adjacent to the Salt Lake, and further away again. The hills in the distance and the ones from which this photograph was taken were held by the Turks and formed a horse-shoe around the plain surrounding the Salt Lake - which was where the British and Newfoundlanders were stationed. – photograph from 2011)



November 26 would see what perhaps was to be 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, had been 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*)

(continued)

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

By this time the situation there had daily been becoming more and more untenable, thus on the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the entire 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 had thereupon been 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of *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*)

The British, Indian and *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at *Gallipoli* – had by now simply been 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: *‘W’ Beach at Cape Helles under shell-fire 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: *‘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 evacuation of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*, the Newfoundland unit had been ordered to the Egyptian port-city of *Alexandria* and beyond.

On January 14, the Australian Expeditionary Force Transport *Nestor* had arrived there with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on board. The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16<sup>th</sup>, on its way southwards down the *Suez Canal* to *Port Suez* where she had docked early on the morrow and where the Newfoundlanders had landed and marched to their encampment.



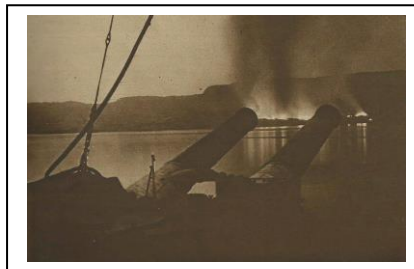


(Right: The image of the Blue Funnel Line vessel *Nestor* is from the *Shipspotting.com* web-site. The vessel was launched and fitted in 1912-1913 and was to serve much of her commercial life until 1950 plying the routes between Britain and Australia. During the Great War she served mainly in the transport of Australian troops and was requisitioned again in 1940 for government service in the Second World War. In 1950 she was broken up.)



There they were to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division had yet to be decided\*.

(Right: The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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* and published in *Illustration*)



\*Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was already becoming a theatre of war.

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



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

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

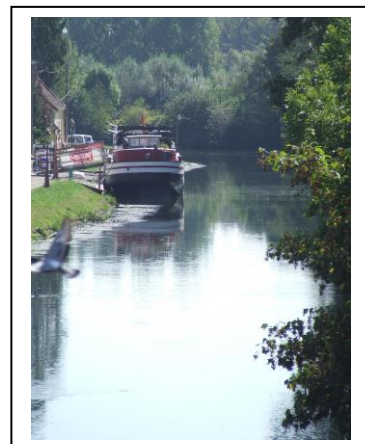
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille.



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

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 which they had then traversed on their way from the station.

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

But some three months later *the Somme* was to have become a part of their history.

On April 13, the entire 1<sup>st</sup> 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 re-enforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.



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

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 had then been 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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: *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 to the right in the photograph – photograph from 2009*)

Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Mailly-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders had soon been 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.



(Right: *Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park – photograph from 2009(?)*)

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\*.

*\*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: 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 greatest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage of the...*First Battle of the Somme...*was to continue for 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 any German counter-assault might well annihilate the shattered survivors 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.



There were then a further two days before the unit had marched further again to the rear area and to billets in the village of Mailly-Maillet.

(continued)

(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 at Mailly-Maillet 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, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was still to number only...*11 officers and 260 rifles*...after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

Of course, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had not been the only unit in the British Army to have incurred horrific losses on July 1, 1916, even though it had indeed been one of the most devastated. But even with its depleted numbers, the Battalion was needed and, after that first re-enforcement, it had almost immediately again been ordered to man the trenches of the front line: as of that July 14, undermanned as seen above, the Newfoundlanders began another tour in the trenches where...*we were shelled heavily by enemy's 5.9 howitzers and a good deal of damage was done to the trenches* (excerpt from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary).

A second re-enforcement draft from Rouen had then arrived days later, on July 21, while the Newfoundland Battalion was at Acheux and then, only three days afterwards – at the very time day that the Prime Minister of Newfoundland had visited the unit – a third draft of sixty other ranks had arrived in Beauval and reported...*to duty*.



(Right above: *The entrance to 'A' Company's quarters – obviously renovated since that time – sunk in the ramparts of the city of Ypres, when the Newfoundland Battalion was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)

On July 27-28 of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong – maybe even fewer - even after still further re-enforcement – would move north and enter the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.



(Right above: *The same re-constructed ramparts as shown above, viewed from just outside the city walls and the far side of the moat which still partially surrounds the place – image from 2010*)

The unit 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.



(continued)



(Preceding page: *Canadian trenches in Sanctuary Wood, not far removed from the Newfoundland Battalion's positions during August and September of 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 would incur casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

And it was to be there in *the Salient* in the sector of a place called *Railway Wood*, that the Newfoundland Battalion would soon be serving after its transfer from France.

(Right above: *Railway Wood, the Newfoundland positions at the time, almost a century later – a monument to the twelve Royal Engineers buried alive there may just be perceived on the periphery of the trees – photograph from 2014*)



(Right above: *The already-battered city of Ypres seen here towards the end of the year 1915 – and some eight months before the Newfoundlanders were to be posted there for the first time – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 8, 1916, after having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the Newfoundland Battalion had been ordered to return southwards.

The unit was thereupon to be transported by train back into France, back into the area of the...*First Battle of – the Somme*.

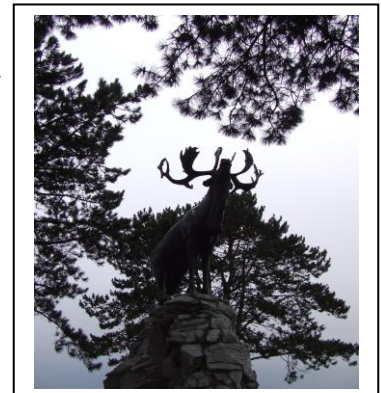
Just four days after unit's return to France from Belgium, on October 12 of 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to take to the offensive; it was at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.



(Right above: *This is the ground over which the 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

The encounter was to prove to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain.

(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 then to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it had furnished 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 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of which, of course, the Newfoundland unit was a battalion.



(Right above: *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 retired to rear positions from the Gueudecourt area. It had been serving continuously in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day.



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

Back at *the Front* the Newfoundland unit had continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties, almost all likely due to enemy artillery – during the late fall and early winter. It was to be a period interrupted only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas season, encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.

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

The parent unit had therefore begun to retire in anticipation thereof once again from *the Front* on December 8, although a goodly number of its personnel, two-hundred-sixty *other ranks* - more than fifty per cent of its strength at the time - was to be seconded on December 11 for several days' work at Carnoy and at Fricourt.

The afore-mentioned Christmas festivities – apparently a turkey dinner washed down with...*real English ale*...- having been completed, it was not to be until a further sixteen days had passed that on January 11 the Newfoundland Battalion would be ordered out of *Corps Reserve* and from its lodgings at *Camps en Amienois* to make its way on foot to the town of Airaines.

From the railway station there it had then entrained for the small town of Corbie where it thereupon took over billets which it already occupied for a short period only two months before. Days later again the unit had continued its progress, once again on foot, back up to the forward area and to...*active service*.

(continued)

That recent six-week Christmas respite spent far to the rear by now a thing of the past, the Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to...*active service*...on January 23, although they apparently had already returned to the trenches by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatalities – of 1917.

And it had been by then the beginning of the winter period. As had been and was to be the case of all the winter periods of the *Great War* – that of 1916-1917 would be a time of relative calm, although cold and uncomfortable – there was to be a shortage of fuel and many other things - for most of the combatants of both sides.

It would also be a time of sickness, and the medical facilities were to be kept busy, particularly, so it seems - from at least Canadian medical documentation - with thousands of cases of dental work.

This period had also provided the opportunity to undergo training and familiarization with the new practices and the recent weaponry of war; in the case of the Newfoundland Battalion these exercises had been at least partially undertaken from February 4 to 18 in the vicinity of the communities of Carnoy and Coisy.

(Right: A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, his unit to be relieved by the Newfoundlanders on March 1, enjoys his cigarette in the cold of the trenches at Sailly-Saillisel during the winter of 1916-1917. – from *Illustration*)



On February 18 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion would begin a five-day trek back from there to the forward area where it was to go back into the firing-line on February 23 to relieve a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers. It had been at a place called Sailly-Saillisel and the reception offered by the Germans would be both lively – and deadly: after only two days the Battalion had incurred four dead, nine wounded and three gassed without there having been any infantry action. The Newfoundlanders were withdrawn on February 25...to return three days later.



The Battalion had by then been carrying with it orders for a...*bombing raid*...on the enemy positions at Sailly-Saillisel...to be carried out on March 1.

(Right above: *The fighting during the period 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(?))

The aforesaid planned raid of the German positions at Sailly-Saillisel was to go ahead a little later than scheduled as it appears that the enemy had also made plans. The reciprocal infantry action(s) had thus continued for the better part of two days, March 2 and 3.

In fact, that sharp engagement at Sailly-Saillisel was to be the sole infantry activity *directly* involving the Newfoundland unit during the entire period from Gueudecourt in mid-

October, 1916, until Monchy-le-Preux in mid-April of 1917. The action would also serve to bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.

After the confrontation at Sailly-Saillisel, the Newfoundland Battalion had been ordered retired to the rear by train, to an encampment at Meaulté. There, and later at *Camps-en-Amienois* – even further behind the lines and where the unit had spent the preceding Christmas period – the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion would spend almost the entire remainder of the month.

(Right: *The Prime Minister of Newfoundland visiting the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, encamped at Meaulté – from The War Illustrated*)



After Sailly-Saillisel the month of March would be a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they were now to spend their time near those communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and in training for upcoming events.

They had even had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band come from Ayr, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras at the time of the Great War, in early 1916 – from Illustration*)



On March 29, the Newfoundlanders had commenced making their way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, the march to finish amid the rubble of the village of Monchy-le-Preux.

(Right: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood atop Vimy Ridge since its inauguration in 1936. – photograph from 2010*)



On April 9 the British Army had 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 – just over four thousand - 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.



(Right above: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen in 1917, from the western, 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*)

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

The 1<sup>st</sup> 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 had proved to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war: four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone\*.

After the debacle of April 14 the remnants of the Newfoundland Battalion had remained in the area of Monchy-le-Preux for but a few days. Its casualty count had been high enough to warrant that it and the Essex Regiment, which had also incurred heavy losses, be amalgamated into a composite battalion until such time as incoming re-enforcements would allow the two units' strengths to once more resemble those of bona fide battalions.

(Right: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands atop the vestiges of a German strongpoint in the centre of the re-constructed community.* – photograph from 2009(?))

When the thirty-nine *other ranks* of a re-enforcement contingent from Rouen had reported to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on April 18, they were to be just in time to march the dozen kilometres or so from Arras up to the line to take over trenches from the Dublin Fusiliers.



There had been by that time only two-hundred twenty *other ranks* in number plus twelve officers serving with some two-hundred personnel of the Essex Regiment in the aforementioned composite force. Those of the 1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Battalion would spend the 19<sup>th</sup> salvaging equipment and burying the dead.

They had then remained *in situ* until the 23<sup>rd</sup>.



(Right above: *Windmill Cemetery stands about mid-way between Monchy-le-Preux – about three hundred metres behind the photographer – and Les Fosses Farm – three hundred metres to the right along the main road to Arras.*– photograph from 2007)

The final action in which the Newfoundland Battalion was to be involved during the five-week long *Battle of Arras* would be the engagement of April 23 at *Les Fosses Farm*. This had in fact been an element of a larger offensive undertaken at the time by units of the British 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Armies.

It apparently had not been a particularly successful venture, at least not in the sector of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, several of the adjacent units reporting having been driven back by German counter-attacks, actions accompanied by heavy losses.

And the Newfoundlanders had also sustained further casualties: ten...*killed in action*, three ...*missing in action*, and forty-eight...*wounded*.



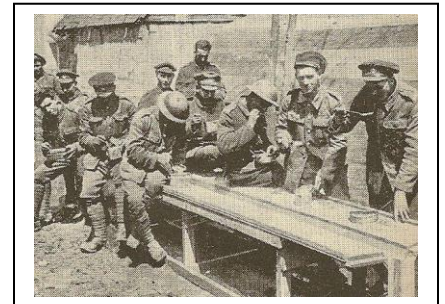
Late on that evening of April 23, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been ordered to retire the dozen or so kilometres to the relative calm of Arras.

(Right: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery* – from a vintage post-card)



(Right below: *Newfoundland troops just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux* – from *The War Illustrated*)

The *Battle of Arras* had by that time been proceeding to its costly and inconclusive close in mid-month – May 15 - but the Newfoundland unit was not to be further involved in any co-ordinated offensive action – it had been too exhausted; this now would be a period when the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be posted in a nondescript fashion on the *Arras Front*, in and out of the quieter trenches.



On May 7 it had been on the move once again and marching to different billets in Berneville where it was to be the subject of a war journalist and photographer.

(Right: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville* – as cited immediately above - in early May, perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup>, of 1917 – from *The War Illustrated*)



At the outset of June, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had retired from the line to Bonneville, there to spend its time again re-enforcing, re-organizing and in training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.

And as seen in an earlier paragraph, it had been in mid-June that Private Osbourne and his re-enforcement draft from Rouen had reported...to duty...to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Newfoundlanders were then soon once again to be moving north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again into the vicinity of Ypres and...*the Salient*, their first days to be spent at *Caribou Camp* where the Newfoundland Battalion supplied working parties for road-mending and for the construction of infantry tracks.

The unit's next posting, on July 5, was to be to the banks of the *Yser Canal* just to the north of the city.



The Newfoundland Battalion remained in the area for a week before it was withdrawn to prepare for the upcoming summer offensive to commence on July 31.

(Preceding page: *The Yser Canal to the north of the city of Ypres (today Ieper): In July of 1917 the Newfoundlanders were stationed in the vicinity of this spot, 'A', 'C' and 'D' Companies to serve in the front lines and also in the immediate reserve on the east bank of the waterway (to the right in the photograph), with 'B' Company and HQ remaining on the western side. – photograph from 2013)*

The low-lying area of Belgian *Flanders*, in which the Newfoundland Battalion was stationed in that July of 1917 - the only part of that country unoccupied by German forces - had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917.

Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was to come to be better known to history simply as *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a not-very high ridge to the north-east that later was to be cited as having been – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's principal objectives.

(Right above: *Troops arriving from the railway station in single file, march past the vestiges of the historic Cloth Hall and through the rubble of the medieval city centre of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer or early autumn of 1917. – from Illustration)*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army. This had been or was also to be the case with the Australians, the New Zealanders and the Canadians, all of whose troops had floundered or would soon flounder their way across the sodden and shell-torn countryside of Belgian Flanders.

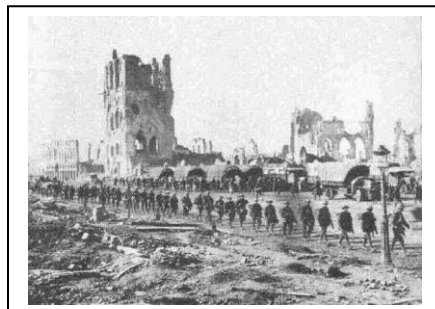
(Right above: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – Passchendaele field in the fall of 1917 – from Illustration)*

(Right above: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration)*

Notably the Newfoundland Battalion at *Passchendaele* was to fight in two major engagements: at the *Steenbeek* on August 16; and at the *Broembeek* (see both immediately below) on October 9.

At the former it had incurred nine *killed in action*, ninety-three *wounded*, and one *missing in action*; at the *Broembeek* the cost would be higher: forty-eight *killed or died of wounds*, one-hundred thirty-two *wounded* and fifteen *missing in action*.

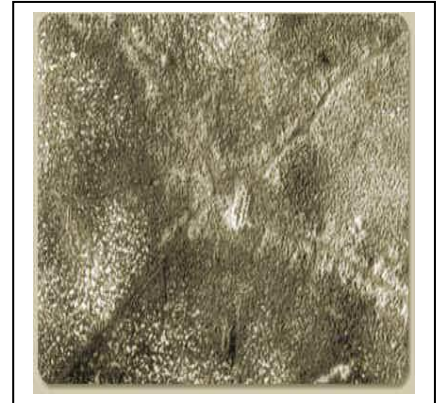
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(Preceding page: *This is the area of the Steenbeek – the stream runs close to the line of trees - and is therefore near to where the Newfoundland Battalion fought the engagement of August 16, 1917. It is some eight kilometres distant from a village called Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)

A week and a day following the mid-August engagement at the *Steenbeek* there were then to be four weeks of relative calm which, for the Newfoundland Battalion, began on August 24 with a four-day withdrawal from the fighting and the forward area to *Penton Camp* to the north-west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe.

This reprieve continued while the British forces re-enforced and re-organized after a month of fighting that had not been proceeding as well as the British High Command had optimistically anticipated.

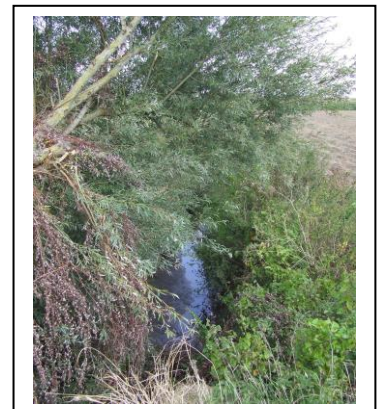


(Right above: *The once-village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

The Newfoundland unit was to go back to war during the last days of what had been a fine month of September. The weather of that month had been in contrast to what had gone before – but, as the fighting at *Passchendaele* started once more...so also the rains.

Once back in their trenches in late September and early October the personnel of the Newfoundland unit prepared for their next concerted attack on German positions. It would come some two weeks later and it would come at the *Broembeek*,

(Right: *This innocuous, placid stream, the Broembeek, was in 1917 a torrent which flooded the surrounding terrain, transforming it into a quagmire. – photograph from 2009*)



On October 11, two days following the affair at the *Broembeek*, the Newfoundland Battalion, having been relieved, marched to the railway station at not-distant Elverdinghe to be transported to *Swindon Camp* near Proven. Having remained there for five days to be both re-enforced and bombed, on the morning of October 17 the unit was once more to board a train.

By ten-thirty on the evening of that above-mentioned October 17 the Newfoundland Battalion had arrived just to the west of the city of Arras and was then to march the final few kilometres to its billets in the community of Berles-au-Bois.

The Newfoundlanders were still there, at Berles-au-Bois, four weeks plus two days later when, on November 17, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to be ordered yet again onto a train, on this occasion to travel in a south-easterly direction to the town of Peronne. From there it began to move further eastward, by this time on foot, towards the theatre of the battle now imminent.



On November 19, while on the move, the Battalion would be issued as it went with... *war stores, rations and equipment*. For much of the night it marched to the assembly areas from where, at twenty minutes past six on that morning of November 20 – *Zero Hour* – the unit, not being in the first wave of the attack, moved up into its forming-up area.

From those forward position, some hours later, at ten minutes past ten that morning, and with bugles blowing, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion advanced to the fray.

(Right: *The Canal St-Quentin at Masnières, the crossing of which and the establishment of a bridgehead being the first objectives for the Newfoundlanders on November 20, the first day of the Battle of Cambrai* – photograph from 2009)



This new offensive – apparently initially conceived to be no more than a large-scale raid -the so-called *Battle of Cambrai*, was to officially last for just two weeks and a day, from November 20 until December 4, the Newfoundlanders to be directly involved at all times during that period.

The battle was to begin well for the British who had used tanks on a large scale for the first time, but opportunities were again be squandered. There had been no troops available to exploit what was, admittedly, a hoped-for yet unexpected success, and by the close of the battle, the Germans had counter-attacked and the British had relinquished as much – more in places - territory as they had originally gained.



The Newfoundland Battalion thus once again had been dealt with severely, in the vicinity of the communities of Marcoing and Masnières where a Caribou stands today and in the area of the Canal St-Quentin which flows through both places: of the total of five-hundred fifty-three officers and men who had advanced into battle, two-hundred forty-eight had become casualties by the end of only the second day\*.

(Right above: *The Caribou at Masnières stands on the high ground to the north of the community. The seizure of this terrain was the final objective of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on November 20; however, whether its capture was ever achieved is at best controversial.* – photograph from 2012)

*\*At five-hundred fifty-three all ranks – not counting the aforementioned ten per cent reserve – the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment even at the outset of the operation was operating at just over fifty per cent of establishment strength: not that it would have been any consolation had it been known, but a goodly number of battalions in all the British and Dominion forces – with perhaps the exception of the Canadians – were encountering the same problem.*



(Right above: *A number of graves of soldiers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment in Marcoing Military Cemetery. Here, as is almost always the case elsewhere, the*



***Commonwealth War Graves Commission, has identified them as being Canadian. – photograph from 2010)***

After the exertions of *Cambrai* the Newfoundlanders were withdrawn from the line, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment by then numbering the strength of only a single company – whereas a full battalion comprises four. The unit then remained in the vicinity of Humbercourt, to the west of Arras, until December 18 when it was to march to Fressin, some fifty kilometres to the north-west. There the unit would spend both Christmas and the arrival of New Year.

The weather was now to oblige during those later days at Fressin where the Newfoundland Battalion was posted for sixteen days; there the *gods* would allow the Newfoundlanders a reminder of home: snow – perhaps a bit too much at times apparently.

At the beginning of January of 1918, after that snowy Christmas period spent to the south-west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion returned to Belgium, to the *Ypres Salient*, for a third time. There, like the other British and Empire troops in the area, they were to spend much of their time building and strengthening defences.



(Right above: *By 1918 Ypres was looking like this; some of these broken buildings had been a school which had served as a shelter for troops in the earlier days of the conflict. – from a vintage post-card)*

Their time was to be divided into the usual postings: the front-line trenches, behind them the support positions and, yet further to the rear again the various reserve sectors. The troops would move in a rotating pattern which would see them spend approximately a week in each posting – although the arrangement was very flexible – and at times there were to be further and longer withdrawals to the rear for training, re-organization and what was often to be called *rest*...although it hardly ever was.

The eight-day respite at *Brake Camp*, Vlamertinghe from February 4 to 11 (*inclusive*) was to be an example of the last-mentioned: work-parties, inspections by...*the Brass*..., the awarding of decorations and the announcement that the Newfoundland Regiment would be designated, as of January 25 of that 1918, the *Royal Newfoundland Regiment*, were some of the highlights of that particular period.

*\*The title had been granted on January 25, 1918, in a War Office Letter (Number 058/4282 (AG 10)) – Document Collection 145.2R21 (D6).*

On the 19<sup>th</sup> day of that February the Newfoundland Battalion marched into the town of Poperinghe (today *Poperinge*) where it was to be billeted for eight days to be employed in the construction and amelioration of nearby defences.

During the late autumn of 1917 and the early part of the winter that followed, the Germans had been preparing for a final effort to win the *Great War*: the Allies were at the time exhausted and lacking man-power after their exertions of 1917 - the British had fought

three campaigns and some units of the French Army had mutinied - whereas the Germans had had available the extra divisions that their victory over the Russians on the *Eastern Front* had by then allowed them.

It had been expected that they, the Germans, would launch a spring offensive - which they were to do – in fact they were to unleash a number of them\*.

*\*There were to be several assaults by the Germans on French forces during that spring. They all met with varying degrees of success at the outset, but eventually they would be thwarted by Petain's divisions, aided at times by the newly-arriving Americans.*



(Right above: *Some of the countryside in-between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele (today Passendale) in the vicinity of where the Newfoundlanders had built a tram-line in January and had been stationed for a week and then five days in March and likewise for five days in early April – photograph from 2011*)

In the area of Zonnebeke, the sector where the Newfoundland unit was to be serving in March and April when at *the Front*, the personnel of the Battalion would continue to dig and wait. While the Germans were to go to the offensive elsewhere on earlier dates, the blow would not fall in the northern area until April.

As suggested in the above paragraphs, the Germans, by this time re-enforced, would do as was expected of them: Ludendorff's armies launched a powerful thrust against the British on March 21, the first day of that spring of 1918, although not in the North where the Newfoundlanders were stationed; they struck at first in the area of - and just south of - *the Somme*, there to overrun the battlefields of 1916 and well beyond.



For a while their advance seemed unstoppable.

(Right above: *British troops accompanied by refugees on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)

For a number of reasons, after two weeks the southern offensive had begun to falter and would eventually halt; but then, just days afterwards, a second offensive, *Georgette*, was to be launched in the northern sector of the front, in Belgian Flanders, where were the Newfoundlanders: the date, April 9. Within only two days the situation of the British had become desperate.

On the day after the first heavy bombardments of April 9, and as the Germans approached the northern French towns of Armentières and Nieppe, troops were to be deployed to meet them.

On that April 10 the Newfoundlanders, having been due to come out of the line and to move back to the area of *the Somme*, would instead be ordered to board buses at three

o'clock in the afternoon, thereupon to be directed southward, towards the border town of Nieppe.

They were to be in action, attempting to stem this latest offensive, just three hours later.

(Right: *The area of La Crêche - the buildings in the background - where the Newfoundlanders de-bussed on April 10 to meet the Germans in the area of Steenwerck and its railway station – photograph from 2010.*)



The British were pushed back to the frontier area of France and Belgium. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April the Newfoundland Battalion, fighting in companies rather than as a single entity, would be obliged to make a series of desperate stands.

On April 12-13 – the dates in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's War Diary are not clear - during the defensive stand near the De Seule crossroads on the Franco-Belgian border, one platoon of 'C' Company was obliterated while trying to check the German advance.

Then, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary cites...*the remainder of 'C' Coy. under Capt. Paterson, M.C. and Hqrs. took up a position along a light railway line and prepared to fight to a finish. ...there can be no doubt that it was Hqrs., 'A' & 'C' Coys. that by their resistance saved what would have been at least a very serious position for the whole 34<sup>th</sup> Division\*.*

'B' and 'D' Companies – in a failed counter-attack on that evening – would be equally heavily involved.

(Right: *Ground just to the east of Bailleul where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be in action during the period April 12 to 21 – photograph from 2013*)



The period from April 10 to 21 was to be a difficult eleven days for all of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's personnel. Nevertheless, somehow, the German breakthrough never had materialised and the front had finally been stabilised.

*\*The 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade – and therefore the Newfoundland Battalion – was to be seconded to the 34<sup>th</sup> Division from the 29<sup>th</sup> Division during this critical period.*

(Right: *The De Seule crossroads, lying astride the Franco-Belgian frontier, also the scene of fierce fighting involving the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on April 12 -13, 1918. Today there stand several houses and a convenience store. – photograph from 2009*)



\* \* \* \* \*

However, after that first day Private Osbourne was not to be further involved in *Georgette* – in fact, it is not clear whether he was ever involved at all: he was on his way for medical treatment, for tonsillitis, on April 11, being at first admitted into the 76<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance

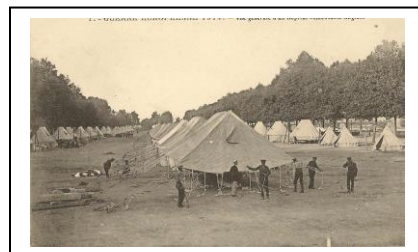


and then transferred on the same day for further treatment to the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Casualty Clearing Station.

(Right: A *British field ambulance, of perhaps a more permanent nature than some: The Field Ambulances were often responsible for the Rest Stations, the establishment pictured here perhaps being one of those. – from a vintage post-card*)

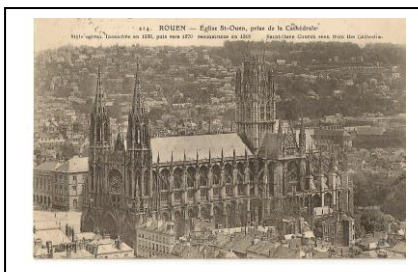


(Right below: A *British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card*)



He was from there forwarded on the following day, April 12, to the 1<sup>st</sup> Convalescent Depot, Boulogne, and three days later again, on the 15<sup>th</sup>, was further transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Depot at nearby Aubenque.

Discharged to Base Depot at Rouen on April 24, Private Osbourne returned...to *duty*...with the Newfoundland Battalion *in the field* on May 1, one of the draft of twenty-nine *other ranks* to arrive on that day at the community of St-Josse, where the Newfoundlanders had temporarily been billeted.



(Right: *The centre of the French city of Rouen with its venerable gothic cathedral at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, only a week before and with the crisis of *Georgette* over, on April 24 and having been relieved in the forward area by a French unit, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment had said farewell to its comrades-in-arms of the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, and on the following day there had followed a recessional parade. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to later be deployed to another unit, but for the summer of 1918 it was to move a world away from Flanders where it had just fought during the crisis of the German spring offensive, to be stationed on the west coast of France.

On April 29, the Newfoundlanders – the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion by now reduced to a total strength of just thirty officers and four-hundred sixty-four *other ranks* – had boarded a train in Belgium for the journey to the French coastal town of Étaples, where they had arrived at eleven o'clock in the late evening.

Their day, however, had not yet been at an end: there was still to be a two-hour march ahead of them before the Newfoundlanders would reach their new quarters. On the following day, April 30, they had been on the march again, a further eight kilometres to the community of St-Josse where they were to remain for the next ten days...

...and where they would be re-joined by Private Osbourne on May 1.

\* \* \* \* \*

St-Josse is at a distance of some five or six kilometres from the coast and about ten kilometres from the well-known sea-side resort of Le Touquet with its fine beach, Paris-Plage. During the next week, and at times afterwards during its next posting, the Battalion would avail of this luxury.

The Newfoundland Battalion remained posted at St-Josse until May 10 when it then marched a further six kilometres inland, to the south-east to the community of Écuire where it was to relieve the troops responsible for the safety and security of the nearby British General Headquarters at Montreuil-sur-Mer and of Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe.



(Right above: *Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force at the time of the Battalion's posting to GHQ – from Illustration*)

The cosmetic honour of the new role at the Headquarters masked the reality that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was no longer capable of serving in the field. And while it is true that a number of re-enforcement drafts arrived at Écuire during this period, for the most part their numbers were to be in single digits.

*\*Although few at home cared to admit it publicly, the problem was that 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had run out of reserves and was unable to continue as a fighting entity. It was to be September before even a battalion of reduced strength could return to active service. At home, mandatory military service was initiated – conscription by another name – but with limited results.*

The posting to Écuire completed, for most of July and all of August the Newfoundlanders had been encamped in much the same area, close to the coastal village of Équihen\* – itself not far removed from the large Channel port of Boulogne – and far to the rear of the fighting, of which there had been plenty elsewhere.



(Right: *A sparsely-populated community of Équihen at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

*\*On July 1, 2 and 3, the eleven officers and three-hundred twenty-three other ranks – well under establishment strength - of the Newfoundland Battalion had marched into Equihen Camp from Écuire. There the unit was to be visited on July 3 by the Right Honourable D.W.F. Lloyd, the new Prime Minister of Newfoundland.*

The Newfoundlanders returned to the fray on Friday, September 13, as one of the three battalions of the 28<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 9<sup>th</sup> Scottish Division. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was once more to serve on the Belgian front where, some six weeks later, having advanced out of the *Salient*, it would finish its war on October 26 at a place called Inghoyghem (today *Ingooghem*).

(continued)

On September 28, the Belgian Army and the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Army broke out of their positions, overrunning the enemy lines. It was the start, for them, of the *Hundred Days Offensive*\*. On the following day, the Newfoundlanders were fighting at the Keiberg Ridge. After almost four years of stalemate, it was again a conflict of movement.



(Right above: *The re-constructed village of Dadizeele (Dadizele) to the north of which the Newfoundlanders dug in on the evening of September 29, 1918 – photograph from 2013*)

*\*This offensive would prove to be the final campaign of the Western Front and would terminate with the Armistice of November 11. It had begun further to the south on July 18 on the French front on the River Marne, followed on August 8 by an onslaught by British and Empire troops near Amiens in what would also become known as 3<sup>rd</sup> Somme.*

The son of John Osborne, fisherman, and of Frances Osborne (née *Evans*) - to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay – of Lobster Cove, later (likely by 1904) of Grand Bank, he was also brother to at least John-Wilson, Frederick, Sarah, Philip and Thomas.

*\*The couple was married in Lobster Cove, October 24, 1894.*

Private Osborne was at first reported as...*wounded and missing* on September 29, 1918. However, the identification of...his remains and their subsequent burial on or about October 4, 1918, was later reported by the *Officer Commanding the 351<sup>st</sup> Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery.*



Private Osborne's record was therefore amended so as to read...*killed in action or died of wounds on or about 28/9/18.*

His remains were later disinterred and re-buried – before September 2, 1919 – to where they repose today.

Ruben Osborne had enlisted at the *declared* age of nineteen years and two months: date of birth in Lobster Cove, Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, November 23, 1898 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register where his name has been recorded as Reuben Osmond).

(Right above: *The sacrifice of Private Osbourne is honoured on the War Memorial in the community of Grand Bank. – photograph from 2015*)

Private Ruben Osbourne was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).





**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 – January 30, 2023.**