



**Second Lieutenant Francis (known as *Frank*) O'Toole (Regimental Number 365\*) is interred in Dozinghem Military Cemetery – Grave reference V. I. 18.**

***\*Officers who were eventually promoted from the ranks may be identified from their Regimental Number. Other officers who were not from the ranks received the King's Commission, or in the case of those in the Newfoundland Regiment, an Imperial Commission, and were not considered as enlisted. These officers thus had no Regimental Number allotted to them.***

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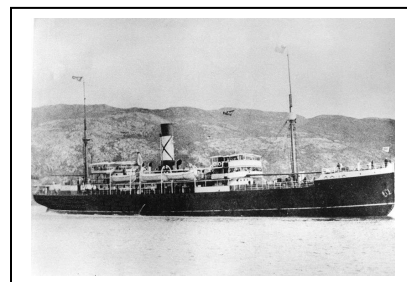
*And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist ‘for the duration’, even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.*

His occupation previous to enlistment recorded among his papers as that of a *checker* employed by *Bowring Brothers* in St. John’s, he was apparently earning an approximate annual five-hundred dollars at the time of his enlistment. Francis (*Frank*) O’Toole was a recruit of the First Draft.

Having presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John’s, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, he underwent a medical examination on August 29, 1914, twenty-five days after the *Declaration of War, 1914*. It was a procedure which was to find him to be...*Fit for foreign service.*

There then likely followed a period of training for Private O’Toole and his fellow recruits, of some five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John’s, during which time, on September 8, he enlisted – engaged at the private soldier’s daily rate of \$1.10, including a daily ten-cent field allowance – and was likely attested on October 1 as were many of the new recruits, although in his case the exact date of that event appears not to be documented.

Private O’Toole was to embark on October 3, only two days after attestation, as a soldier of the *First Five Hundred*, onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Florizel* awaiting the contingent in St. John’s Harbour. The ship would sail for the United Kingdom on the following day, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.



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

(Right: *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 O’Toole 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 was to provide 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.



It was to be during the period spent at Edinburgh Castle, that Private O’Toole would receive a first promotion, to the rank of lance corporal and thereupon put up his first stripe...



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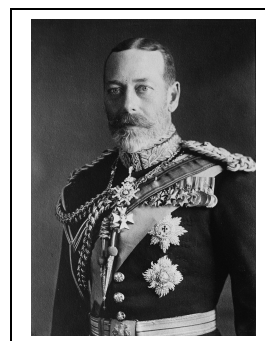
...and it was to be while the Newfoundlanders were at *Stobs Camp* that, on July 27, he received the second, having received a further elevation in rank, on this second occasion to the rank of corporal.

(Preceding page: *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 from *Stobs Camp* 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 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion\*.

(Right below: *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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, comprising those four Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, was thereupon attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

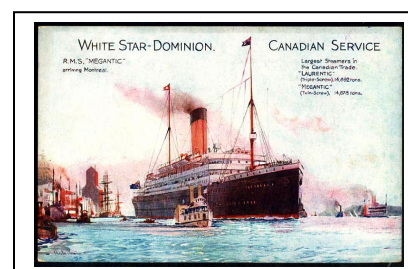
It had been during the aforesaid period spent at Aldershot that Corporal O’Toole of ‘A’ Company – he was not to be alone in doing so - had been prevailed upon, he on or about August 13-14, to re-enlist for the duration of the war\*.

\*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 1<sup>st</sup> 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, here in her peace-time colours of a ‘White Star Line’ vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)



(continued)

On August 20, 1915, Corporal O'Toole and his charges in 'A' Company 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



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



(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)

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



(Right above: An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at *Suvla Bay* – from the 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.*

Corporal O'Toole, however, would not see the *Gallipoli* adventure to its end; six weeks into the Newfoundland unit's service at *Suvla Bay* he was to be wounded and evacuated to hospital.

\* \* \* \* \*

On November 2, Corporal O'Toole suffered a gun-shot wound to his right knee. He was thereupon evacuated from the field to the 54<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station and from there likely ferried for further treatment to one of the several medical facilities by that time established at *Mudros Bay* on the Greek island of Lemnos some fifty kilometres distant.



He was later placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Nevasa* to be evacuated to the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta where he was admitted into the St. Elmo Military Hospital on November 26.

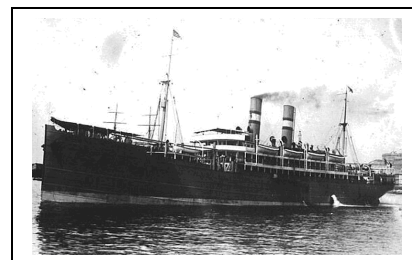


(Right above: *The image of HMHS Nevasa, here seen in the white garb of a war-time hospital ship, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. She served as such and also as a troopship for the duration of the conflict and then as a troopship during the war of 1939-1945 before being scrapped in 1948.*)

By that time he was Sergeant O'Toole, having received the third stripe on November 14.

(Right above: *One of the many British military hospitals, today abandoned – since independence in 1964 - on the former British possession of Malta, infirmaries that were used during both World Wars – photograph from 2011*)

Following treatment, from the aforementioned Military Hospital Sergeant O'Toole was forwarded on December 11 to the *Ghain Tuffieha Convalescent Camp*, also on Malta, for convalescence. By the end of that year it had been decided that he be invalided to the United Kingdom and to that end on the final day of 1915, he embarked onto the Italian hospital ship *Regina d'Italia* for the passage of some eight days.



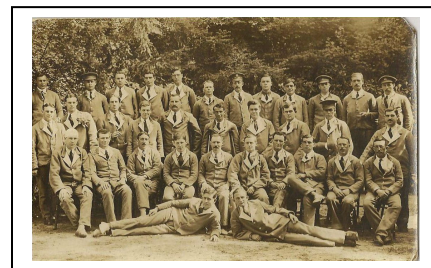
(Right above: *The image of the Regina d'Italia is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries. Built in Great Britain, she was bought by Italian entrepreneur Lloyd Sabaudo for his new trans-Atlantic shipping company. During the war she served as a hospital ship in the Mediterranean theatres before resuming her career as principally an emigrant ship. She was scrapped in Italy in 1928.*)

Having arrived back in England, Sergeant O'Toole was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital in the Borough of Wandsworth where he was admitted on January 8.



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

(Right: *Newfoundland patients, here unfortunately unidentified, convalescing at the 3<sup>rd</sup> London General Hospital, Wandsworth – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



He remained in care at Wandsworth for apparently no longer than two weeks as he is recorded as having been discharged and subsequently granted, on January 22, the customary ten-day furlough accorded military personnel upon release from hospital. It was time that he apparently spent at least partially at the *Waverly Hotel* in Edinburgh.

(Right: *The image of the Waverly Hotel in Edinburgh is from the Wikipedia web-site: throughout the Great War the owner gave special rates in all his hotels to servicemen.*)



Sergeant O'Toole is then shown as having reported to duty to Ayr, and to the Regimental Depot on February 1 of that 1916.

The Regimental Depot, at the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, had by that time been established there for some six months, since the summer of 1915. Ayr was to serve as the overseas base for the Second (Reserve) Battalion from where – as of November of 1915 up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts were to be despatched to bolster the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr – most likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were billeted the 'other ranks', is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right. – by courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

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



A year and three months later the now-Lieutenant O'Toole was one of a group of officers ordered to join the British Expeditionary Force in Europe towards the end of April and who subsequently reported to the Newfoundland Battalion on May 4 at Arras. He had received his Imperial Commission and an appointment as a second lieutenant, as of November 1, 1916, while still serving at Ayr.

\* \* \* \* \*

(continued)

By this time Second Lieutenant O'Toole had been absent from the Newfoundland Battalion for better than eighteen months. During that time the unit had been withdrawn from the Middle East to play a role fighting on the *Western Front*. There it was subsequently to serve in both France and Belgium.

What now follows is a resume of that story:

November 26 had seen the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes during the *Gallipoli Campaign*. A freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm had struck the *Suvla Bay* area on that day and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival from the wrath of nature rather than from that of the enemy was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties in both camps, 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 were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite but the end of the *Gallipoli Campaign* was already in sight. After the storm, the Newfoundlanders were to remain stationed at *Suvla Bay* for only a further twenty-five days.

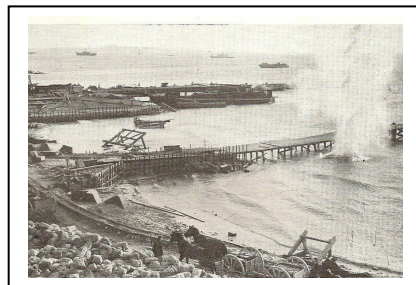
By that time they were to have served there for exactly three months to the day.

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



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

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



This operation would take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the rear-guard on this second occasion also.

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

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

(Right: *The same '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)



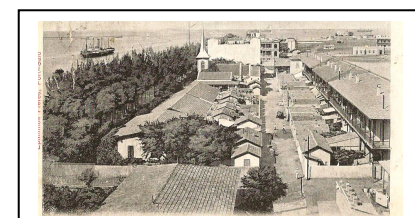
When the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city Alexandria, having arrived there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to Suez,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



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

(Right above: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 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* from *Illustration*)

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 had boarded His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq on March 14 to sail up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles, on March 22.



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

(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 Newfoundland Battalion's train had found its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having travelled unused in a separate wagon.

Having de-trained at the local station at two o'clock in the morning, the Newfoundlanders were now still to endure the long, dark march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

It is doubtful if many of those tired soldiers were to pay much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they had then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to become a part of their history.



On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days’ time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

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

Just days following the Newfoundland Battalion’s arrival on the *Western Front*, two of the four Companies – ‘A’, and ‘B’ – were to take over several support positions from a British unit\* before the entire Newfoundland unit was to then be 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 the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.*

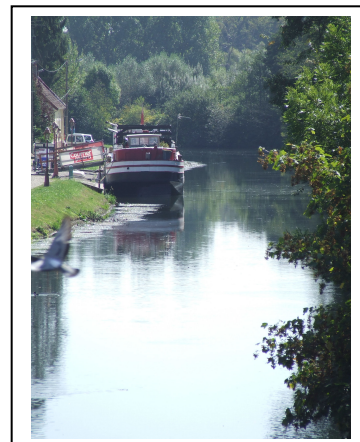
The Newfoundlanders were also soon to be preparing for the British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, that flowed – and still does so today – through the region.

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

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

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

*\*Perhaps ironically, the majority of the Battalion’s casualties was to be incurred during the advance from the third line of British trenches to the first line from where the attack proper was to be made, and while struggling through British wire laid to protect the British positions from any German attack.*



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.

(Preceding page: *Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village*. – photographs from 2010 and 2015)

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



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

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 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.

(Right above: *The re-constructed village of Maily-Maillet – the French Monument aux Morts in the foreground - is twinned with the community of Torbay, St. John’s East*. – photograph from 2009)

There on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported *to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the events at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power having arrived, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion still numbered only...*11 officers and 260 rifles*...after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

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

It had been ordered to the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate on the entire *Western Front*, there to continue to re-enforce and to re-organize after the ordeal of *Beaumont-Hamel*.

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



(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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.

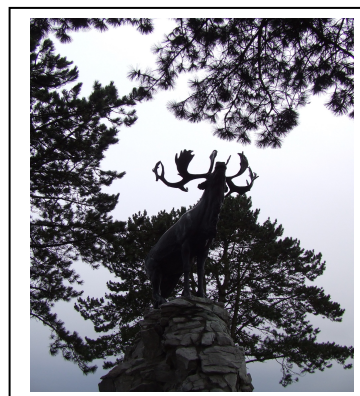
Four days after its return to France, on October 12, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the *Newfoundland Regiment* had again been ordered to the offensive; it was at a place called *Gueudecourt*, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of *Beaumont-Hamel*.



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

(Right above: *This is the ground over which the 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)

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

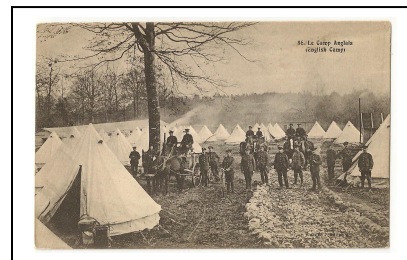


After *Gueudecourt*, the *Newfoundland Battalion* had continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period to be broken only by the several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the

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.



The only infantry activity directly involving the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion during that entire 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 adjacent: *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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, encamped at Meaulté – from The War Illustrated*)

On March 29, the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.



(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Gran'Place) of the city of Arras in early 1916 after some eighteen months of bombardment – from Illustration*)



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(Preceding page: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood on Vimy Ridge since 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 this attack was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, its only positive episode having been 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 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 would prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war: four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone\*.



(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*)

*\*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: *Newfoundland troops at ease just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux – from The War Illustrated*)

The final action in which the Newfoundland Battalion was to be involved during the *Battle of Arras* would be the engagement of April 23 at *Les Fosses Farm*. This was in fact 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 was apparently not to be a particularly successful venture, at least not in the area of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, several of the adjacent units reporting having been driven back by German counter-attacks and accompanied by heavy losses.

Late on that same evening the Newfoundlanders had retired to the relative calm of Arras where it had been, as recorded earlier, when Second Lieutenant O'Toole was to report to duty early in the month of that May of 1917.

\* \* \* \* \*

That month of May was to be a period when the Newfoundlanders would be moved hither and thither on the *Arras Front*, marching into and out of the trenches. While there was to be the ever-present artillery-fire, concerted infantry activity, particularly after May 15 – the end of the *Battle of Arras* - apart from the marching was limited.

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

(Right: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville – not Bonneville - in early May, perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup>, of 1917 – from The War Illustrated*)



The Regimental War Diary entry of July 5 and other papers in his dossier note that Second Lieutenant O'Toole was the officer in charge of a party of twenty-seven other ranks to be seconded on that date to work with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Tunnelling Company of the Royal Engineers in the forward area. However, what the detachment's duties were to have been during this time appears not to have been documented among his papers.



The party had reported back to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on July 22.

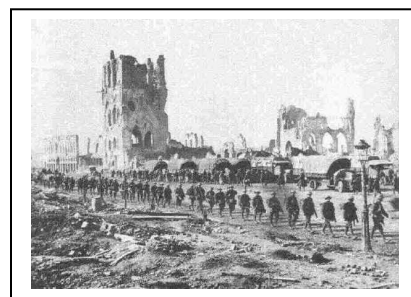
The Newfoundlanders had then soon once again been moving north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again into the vicinity of Ypres and...*the Salient*, their first posting to the banks of the *Yser Canal* just north of the city.

(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, manned its eastern bank: East is to the right – photograph from 2014*)



This low-lying area, Belgian *Flanders*, the only part of the country unoccupied by German forces, had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917.

(Right: *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*)



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 objectives.

(Right: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)



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



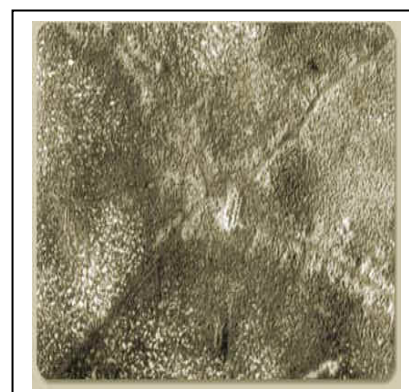
The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army – as were to be by then the Australians, the New Zealanders and the Canadians – all of whose troops had floundered their way alongside the British across the sodden and shell-torn countryside of Flanders.

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 had been higher: forty-eight *killed or died of wounds*, one-hundred thirty-two *wounded* and fifteen *missing in action*.



(Right: *This is the area of the Steenbeek – the stream runs close to the trees - and also close to where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion fought the engagement of August 16, 1917. It is some eight kilometres distant from a village called Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)

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



The name of Second Lieutenant O’Toole does not figure in the Regimental War Diary’s list of those officers involved at the *Steenbeek*. But it is certain that he played his part at the *Broembeek*.

After a respite during much of the month of September, during which the British – and thus the Newfoundlanders - reinforced and re-organized, the *Battle of Passchendaele* recommenced. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion began to prepare for the offensive at the *Broembeek*, otherwise recorded as the *Battle of Poelkapelle*.

*‘The Batt’n formed up for attack astride the STRAVEN\* Railway and about 300 yds south of BROOMBEKE River. After attack line extended across the railway to Tranquil House...’ – from a written report in another soldier’s file.*

*\*In fact it was the Ypres-Staden railway line which today no longer exists.*

(Right below: *An apparently innocuous stream, the nondescript Broembeek seen here overflowed its banks in the autumn of 1917, and transformed its surrounds into a quagmire.* – photograph from 2010)

On October 9, to the north-east of the Belgian village of Langemarck, during that infantry action at the *Broembeek*, Second Lieutenant O'Toole was once again wounded, on this occasion incurring gun-shots to the abdomen and to the right leg while serving with his 'A' Company.

The only child of Joseph O'Toole (deceased in 1894(?)) and of Minnie O'Toole of St. John's - she to become Minnie Miller in 1906 (husband *John*) of 261, Water Street West – he was reported as having *died of wounds in the field* on October 12, 1917. Since Dozinghem – the site of his subsequent burial - was well behind the lines, it may well be that he was en route to one of the many medical facilities in the area at the time of his death.



Frank O'Toole had enlisted at the age of twenty-two years: possible date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, September 9, 1892.



(Right above: *An innocuous Belgian stream, the Broembeek had burst its banks in the autumn of 1917, and had transformed the surrounding fields into a quagmire.* – photograph from 2010)

(*The photograph of Second Lieutenant O'Toole is from the Provincial Archives.*)

Second Lieutenant Francis O'Toole was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 11, 2023.