Private Thomas Ricketts (Regimental Number 4020) is interred in Dadizeele New British Cemetery: Grave reference, V. E. 26..

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman, Thomas Ricketts was a volunteer of the Seventeenth Recruitment Draft. He presented himself for medical examination on October 25 of 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, October 25, and at the same venue, that Thomas Ricketts 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 subsequently came to pass, while still at the CLB Armoury on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the same twenty-fifth day of that month of October he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, Thomas Ricketts became...a soldier of the King.

Private Ricketts, Number 4020, was not to leave Newfoundland for overseas service for a further seven weeks less two days but how he was now to spend that prolonged interval after his attestation appears to have been only partially documented. He is recorded as having been granted an eleven-day furlough between November 16 and November 26 (inclusive); no further details are documented – except to say that Private Ricketts did not return to barracks until the last day of the month, November 30. No reason for this appears to be among his papers, nor do there seem to have been any consequences - and whether or not he was to spend any of that time at his declared place of residence, Westport (formerly Western Cove), White Bay, at the time in the District of St. Barbe, remains a matter of speculation.

But both before and after this period of leave, Private Ricketts was likely quartered in barracks* in the east end of the capital city.

*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. It appears to have become the norm for the later recruits to have all been quartered there.

As seen above, Private Ricketts was not to depart for overseas service from Newfoundland until forty-seven days had passed after his enlistment. Thus it was on December 11 that he embarked in St. John’s Harbour onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel Florizel for passage as far as Halifax, Nova Scotia – this was a part of her commercial run - from where he and his draft were to make the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom.

One single entry has him traversing the ocean on board the Canadian Pacific ship Missanabie. If this is correct, then Private Ricketts and those with whom he was travelling then journeyed on from Halifax* to St. John, New Brunswick, to embark on or before
December 18. *Missanabie* sailed from there on the morrow, December 19, to dock in the Scottish port of Glasgow on the final day of the year 1917.

*This change of itinerary may well have happened since Halifax had suffered a cataclysmic disaster when on December 6 an ammunition ship, the ‘Mont Blanc’, had exploded after a collision with the ‘Imo’.*

(Right: Much of down-town Halifax had been obliterated and the harbour was unable to service the traffic that it had been handling up to that point. Saint John was the nearest alternative port, particularly as the St. Lawrence River would have been, by that time of the year, starting to freeze.

(Right: 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. She was one of many requisitioned larger ocean-going vessels to carry troops from Canada to overseas service in the United Kingdom unlike her sister-ship Metagama which continued to serve her commercial routes during the War. On September 9 of 1918, during a crossing from Liverpool to New York, Missanabie was torpedeed and sunk off the coast of Ireland with the loss of forty-five lives.)

Having landed in the United Kingdom the Newfoundland contingent entrained for the Regimental Depot on the west coast of Scotland – from Glasgow, a distance of perhaps some seventy-five kilometres or just over forty-five miles.

   * * * * *

Some three years and three months prior to that month of January of 1918 when Private Ricketts 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 above: *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.

(continued)
The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island. 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 reinforcements 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.

(Right: The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and 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.

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 1st 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.

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 first re-enforcements to be dispatched to the 1st Battalion.

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.

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.
That November 15 of 1915 was to see not only the departure of the 1st 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 2nd 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 1st 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 5th day of the month the new-comers, formerly ‘C’ Company of the 3rd 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 1st 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, perhaps on Olympic, from Halifax via Liverpool and yet a further one-hundred eighty-five at the beginning of June, but already by this time the lack of young men forthcoming to the recruiting stations in Newfoundland was beginning to prove problematic.
Two months subsequent to this June detachment, a draft of one-hundred four other ranks, departed St. John’s on August 4, 1917, and reported to Ayr late in that same month. It was not to be followed until October 14 when the next contingent from home arrived.

Then, as recorded in an above paragraph, it was on or towards the end of the month of December before any further re-enforcements for the Newfoundland unit set foot in the United Kingdom and before Private Ricketts would report…to duty…to the Regimental Depot at Ayr.

* * * * *

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 of March 17. Because of the quarantine in Windsor, Nova Scotia, imposed upon those who had sailed from home on January 31 of 1917, this subsequent contingent, comprising for the most part the Eleventh Recruitment Draft, 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 1st 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 2nd (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 2nd (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 1st 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.

During the summer months of 1917, as of early July the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment and the Regimental Depot had been transferred from Ayr to not-so-distant Barry. Initially intended to be a permanent move, the protest from several quarters was so great that the Newfoundlanders were back in Ayr by the third week of September.

However, both the Regimental Depot and the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion were very soon to move quarters from the Royal Burgh of Ayr in Scotland to southern England, to Hazely Down Camp, in the county of Hampshire and not far distant from the historic cathedral city of Winchester. This transfer was finalized during the latter part of January, 1918, so hardly had Private Ricketts arrived in Scotland before he should have been packing his bags once more.

(Right above: Troops march through a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp at some time during the winter of 1918 – image from The War Illustrated)

During this period at Hazely Down Camp Private Ricketts was to report sick and was diagnosed as having a case of the measles. He was thus admitted into the camp’s Military Hospital where he was to remain for two weeks and a day, from March 8 to 23 inclusive, before being discharged back to the Newfoundland unit.

It was on May 25th that the 46th Re-enforcement Draft from Hazely Down – Private Ricketts one of its one-hundred twenty other ranks - took ship in the English town and harbour of Folkestone for France where it disembarked, at either Le Havre or Rouen. The contingent reported on the 27th, to the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot in the vicinity of the last-named city of Rouen for a very few days of final training and organizing* before continuing onwards to their rendezvous with 1st Battalion.

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

(Right: British troops disembark at Rouen en route to the Western Front. – from Illustration)

*Apparently, the standard length of time for this final training at the outset of the war had been ten days – although this was to become more and more flexible as the War progressed - in areas near Rouen, Étaples, Le Havre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.
When Private Ricketts reported…to duty…with the parent unit, the 1st Battalion of the by-then *Royal* Newfoundland Regiment was stationed at Écuires, on the west coast of France (see further below). Although his personal file says it was on May 31, he was likely a private soldier of the contingent of one-hundred seventeen *other ranks* which had arrived there from Rouen on the day before, the 30th, according to the *Regimental War Diary*.

* * * * *

By the time of that May of 1918, the first contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment had already been serving overseas for some three years and eight months. The 2nd (**Reserve**) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had been formed – in the spring of 1916 - and multiple drafts had been dispatched from Ayr, Barry and from Winchester to supplement the strength of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at *Gallipoli* and on the Continent (see immediately below).


As for Thomas Ricketts, by that May 31 he had been a soldier of the Newfoundland Regiment for two-hundred eighteen days.

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

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

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 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)

There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

(continued)
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.

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.

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

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.

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 1st Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of Cape Helles, on the western tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

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

The British, Indian and Anzac forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at Gallipoli – had 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 above: ‘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 above: ‘W’ Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011)
Immediately after the British 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 1st Battalion on board. The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16th, 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.

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

(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.)

(Right: The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment were among the last to leave on two occasions, at both Suvla Bay and Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis 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 1st 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.

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

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

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

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.

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

On April 13, the entire 1st Battalion had subsequently marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where it would be billeted, would receive 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 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment Battalion, were then the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.

(Right 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 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 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.*

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.

(Right: 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 14th of July, 1916, the 1st 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 1st 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 1st 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)

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

(continued)
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.

(Right: *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: *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 *1st* 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 1st Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon. – photograph from 2007*)

The encounter was to prove to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain.
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 88th Infantry Brigade of which, of course, the Newfoundland unit was a battalion.

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 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.

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…. had 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.

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 1st 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 1st 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 to be withdrawn on February 25...to return just 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 1st Battalion would spend almost the entire remainder of the month.

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.

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

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.

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 Canadian National Memorial which has stood atop Vimy Ridge since its inauguration in 1936 – photograph from 2010)

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

(continued)
The 1st Battalion was to play its part during the Battle of Arras, a role that would begin at the place called Monchy-le-Preux on April 14 and which would finish ten days later, on April 23, perhaps a kilometre distant, at Les Fosses Farm. After Beaumont-Hamel, the ineptly-planned action at Monchy-le-Preux 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.

When the thirty-nine other ranks of a re-enforcement contingent from Rouen had reported to the 1st 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 1st Newfoundland Battalion would spend the 19th salvaging equipment and burying the dead.

They had then remained in situ until the 23rd.

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 5th, 3rd and 1st Armies.
It apparently had not been a particularly successful venture, at least not in the sector of the 1st 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 1st Battalion had been ordered to retire the dozen or so kilometres to the relative calm of Arras.

(Right above: *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: *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 coordinated offensive action – it had been too exhausted; this now would be a period when the 1st 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 above: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville – as cited immediately above - in early May, perhaps the 7th, of 1917 – from The War Illustrated*)

At the outset of June, the 1st 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.

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 days to be spent at Caribou Camp, where they were to be employed for the seventy-two hours or so – day and night – in repairing, in strengthening and in the construction of the various defences of the area.

To that end a goodly number of them were to be temporarily transferred to the Royal Engineers under whose collective watchful eye they were now to labour.

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 Battalion remained in the area for a week before it was withdrawn to prepare for the upcoming offensive to commence on July 31.
The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, manned its eastern bank: East is to the right – photograph from 2014)

The low-lying area, Belgian Flanders, in which the 1st Battalion now was - 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.

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.

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 1st 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.

An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – Passchendaele field in the fall of 1917 – from Illustration)

(Right: 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.

(continued)
A week and a day following the engagement at the Steenbeek there were then to be four weeks of relative calm which was, for the Newfoundland Battalion, to begin on August 24 with a four-day withdrawal from the forward area to Penton Camp to the north-west of the afore-mentioned Belgian town of Poperinge.

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

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 had started once more...so had those infamous rains.

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

Two days following the affair at the Broembeek, having been relieved, the Newfoundlanders had then marched to the railway station at 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 that same evening, the Newfoundland Battalion had arrived just to the west of the city of Arras and would now 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 and three days later when, on November 17, the 1st 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 had begun 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 had 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, had 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 1st Battalion had advanced to the fray.

(Right above: *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 1st 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 1st 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.*
After the exertions of Cambrai, the Newfoundlanders had been withdrawn from the line, the last casualties incurred on December 4. The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment by then numbered the strength of only a single company - whereas a full battalion comprises four.

The withdrawal from the theatre of battle had begun at half past five on the morning of December 5 with an eleven-kilometre march. On the evening of the same day the Newfoundland unit had taken a train which was to become the victim of an enemy artillery bombardment with the engine hit and forced off the track. Thus it was not until the morning of the morrow that the 1st Battalion had reached its destination, Humbercourt.

The 1st Battalion had 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 New Year.

The weather was now to oblige during those later days at Fressin where the Newfoundland Battalion was to be posted for sixteen days; 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 1st Battalion had 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)

The 1st Battalion’s posting during that winter and early spring was to be divided into the usual duties: 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 had been further and longer withdrawals to the rear for training, re-organization and what was often to be called rest: 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 was now to be, as of January 25 of that 1918, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, Had been 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 above-mentioned February 11 the Newfoundland unit had moved westward across the Franco-Belgian border to the area of Steenvoorde where it was to be billeted for the following eight days. There, and elsewhere, there was yet work to do: on the 19th day of that February the Newfoundland Battalion had marched back into Belgium and into the town of Poperinghe (today Poperinge) where it was to be billeted for a further eight days to be employed in the construction and amelioration of nearby defences.

During the interim of the late autumn of 1917 and the early part of the winter that had followed, the Germans had been preparing for a final effort to win the Great War: the Allies were 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 - and the Germans had available the extra divisions that their victory over the Russians on the Eastern Front now allowed them.

It had been expected that they would launch a spring offensive - which they would – 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.

In the area of Zonnebeke, the sector where the Newfoundland unit was now to serve in March and April when at the Front, the personnel of the Battalion had continued to dig and build and wait. While the Germans had gone 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, had done as was expected of them: Ludendorff’s armies had 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 had 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 had seemed unstoppable.

(Right above: British troops accompanied by refugees retreating in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration)
For a number of reasons, after two weeks the 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 the Newfoundlanders had been posted: 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 had approached the 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, were instead 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 above: 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 had been pushed back to the frontier area of France and Belgium. On the 12th of April the Newfoundland Battalion, fighting in companies rather than as a single entity, had had to make a series of desperate stands.

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

On April 12-13 – the dates in the 1st 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 had been obliterated while trying to check the German advance.

Then, as the 1st 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 34th Division*.

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

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

*The 88th Brigade – and therefore the Newfoundland Battalion – was to be seconded to the 34th Division from the 29th Division during this critical period.
By April 18 the Newfoundland Battalion had taken over a sector of the new Front Line to be relieved by French troops three days afterwards, on the 21st. It had then retired in preparation for a more permanent departure from the field (see further below).

By this time, the German advance having been held and the danger passed, on April 24 the 1st Battalion of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was to bid farewell to its comrades-in-arms of the 88th Brigade and 29th Division. On the morrow, April 25, there had been a full recessional parade complete with speeches from Brigadier-General Freyberg, Commanding Officer of the 88th Brigade.

The unit was to later be deployed to another unit, a Scottish infantry division, but for the summer of 1918 it had been ordered moved a world away from Flanders where, as seen in the preceding pages, it had just fought during the crisis of the German spring offensive. The Newfoundlanders were to now be stationed on the west coast of France.

On April 29, the unit personnel – the Newfoundland Battalion by now having been reduced to a total strength of just thirty officers and four-hundred sixty-four other ranks – had boarded a train in Belgium for the French coastal town of Étaples, where they had arrived by eleven o’clock in the late evening.

Their day, however, had not yet been at an end: there had still been 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 would remain for the next ten days.

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 – on that part of the beach not reserved for officers.

The Newfoundland Battalion had remained posted at St-Josse until May 10 when it had then marched a further six kilometres inland to the south-east to the community of Écuires. There 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.

(continued)
Whichever in fact was the exact date, according to the Battalion War Diarist the new-comers were to be greeted by an...*Air raid by hostile aeroplanes.*

* * * * *

The protective role of the Newfoundland unit was now to continue for another month but the cosmetic honour of this duty was to mask the reality that the 1st Battalion of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was no longer capable of serving in the field.

*Although few at home cared to admit it publicly, the problem was that 1st 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.*

*And while it is true that a number of re-enforcement drafts were to arrive at Écuires during this period, for the most part their numbers had been in single digits or only just higher.*

The posting to Écuires completed, for most of July and all of August the Newfoundlanders were 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 was to be plenty elsewhere.

(Right below: *The 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 below establishment strength - of the Newfoundland Battalion marched into Equihen Camp from Écuires. There the unit had been visited on July 3 by the Right Honourable D.W.F. Lloyd, the new Prime Minister of Newfoundland and it was there that the unit would pass the next two months.

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

But that event had still been in the unforeseeable future.

On September 28, the Belgian Army and the 2nd British Army broke out of their positions and overrun 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, the Great War on the Western Front was once again to be a conflict of movement.
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 3rd Somme.

It had been just before mid-night of October 1 that the Newfoundland Battalion was to take up positions in the area of the railway station at Ledeghem and to relieve the Royal Scots. On October 2...Orders had been received to prepare to continue the advance but final orders were never received. Neither did the Newfoundland unit attack nor the enemy counter-attack on that day and both sides remained where they were.

Thus by October 3 the advance on the Newfoundlanders’ front had begun to stall, albeit temporarily. At that place called Ledeghem the Germans gave notice that they were far from being a spent force. For five days attempts were made to take the village; on October 6, when the 1st Battalion retired to rest, it was still in enemy hands.

The advance in that sector was not to continue until October 14 with the Newfoundland unit reuniting to the attack on that date. Two weeks had been necessary to clear Ledeghem of the enemy and although by the end of that October 14 the day’s fighting had carried the advance well beyond Ledeghem, the overall effort was to cost the 1st Battalion a further three-hundred casualties.

The son of Cornelius Ricketts (deceased on May 27, 1905, apparently killed in an accidental explosion) and of Elizabeth Ricketts (née Stuckless*, she later to become the second wife of Alfred Pittman of Sop’s – or simply Sops - Island) of Western Cove (later re-named West Port (Westport)), White Bay, he was also brother to Alexander-William of West Port - to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - and to Nathaniel, Selina-Jane, Albertha, Moulton-Juliann and to Prudence-Lucy.

*The couple had been married on September 4 of 1888.

Private Ricketts was reported as having been...killed in action...while serving with ‘B’ Company – it is suggested - during fighting in the Ledeghem-Drie Masten area of Belgium on October 14, 1918.

(continued)
Originally interred in close vicinity to Ledeghem, his remains were later transferred to lie where they repose today.

Thomas Ricketts had enlisted at the declared age of twenty-three years and one month. Thus far the exact date of his birth has proved to be elusive.

(Preceding page: The Caribou at Harlebeke, Courtrai – today Kortrijk –, commemorates the eventual crossing of the Lys Canal on October 19-20 of 1918, and the sacrifice of the Hundred Days Offensive. – photograph from 2012)

The photograph of Private Ricketts on the preceding page is from the Provincial Archives.

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

Sopp’s Island
White Bay
Oct 13th 1921

Dear sir, you send me to say what he was a soldier is number was 4020 (in the royal newfoundland regt Thomas Ricketts, what money I want is money enought to keep is sistr until she gets old enought to take care of herself; and I would be glady please that you would be able to get it for me, he have to sister to look out to and no one to take care of they and why shouden I get some money to maintain them until they are able to look out to there selves so I think I have said all hoping to here from you soon I will be tanksful if you try to get it for me

from Mrs Elizabeth
Pittman
Sopps Island

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 31, 2023.