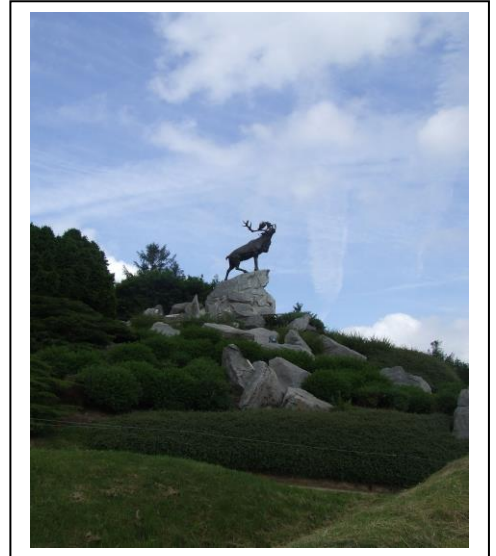


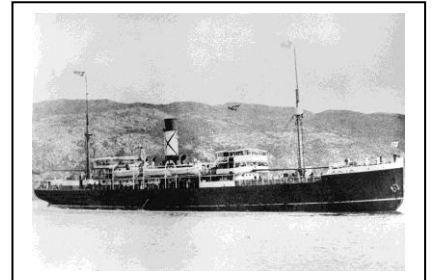
ROBERTS . C .

Private Cecil Roberts (Regimental Number 3908), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated beneath the Caribou in Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman, Cecil Roberts was a recruit of the Sixteenth Draft. Presenting himself for medical examination at Headquarters at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on July 12, 1917, he then enlisted - engaged *for the duration of the war* at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 per diem – and also attested on that same day.



Private Roberts embarked for overseas service on October 3 of 1917. While some records say that his draft travelled from St. John's by train, certain other sources have it to be on board the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* (right) that the party travelled to Halifax, Nova Scotia, there to take a troop transport* across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom.



**Perhaps it was on Metagama which sailed from Halifax with Canadian re-enforcements on October 6 to dock in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on the 17th.*

Arriving in England the contingent entrained for the west coast of Scotland. By this time, the Regimental Depot at Ayr had already been in existence to serve as the base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment for more than two years. It was from here – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers from home had been despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the *Western Front*, there to bolster the four fighting companies of 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *an aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

2nd (Reserve) Battalion was soon to move quarters from the Royal Borough of Ayr in Scotland to southern England, to Hazely Down, Hampshire, not far distant from the historic cathedral city of Winchester.

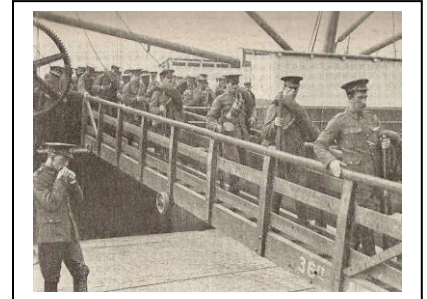


(continued)

This transfer was finalized during the latter part of January, 1918, and it was from Hazely Down that Private Roberts was eventually to be ordered to France to join the British Expeditionary Force.

(Preceding page: *a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp at some time during the winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated*)

Private Roberts was a soldier of the 40th Re-enforcement Draft of eighty *other ranks* which left Hazely Down on March 27, 1918, en route to the Continent. It disembarked on the 29th, two days later, almost inevitably spending some days, as was customary, at the British Expeditionary Force Base Depot at Rouen for last-minute training and organization* before proceeding to its rendezvous with 1st Battalion in Belgium.



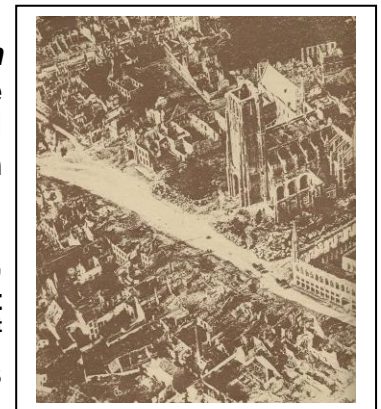
(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen en route to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

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

The Regimental War Diary makes no mention of any re-enforcements arriving either on or about April 4 – but this does not preclude Private Roberts' records being correct. It was a day on which three of the four Companies of 1st Battalion, at the time posted to Haslar Camp to the rear, were providing work-parties to labour on defences in the *Divisional Reserve Line*.

By the evening of the next day the Newfoundlanders were back *in* the line, having relieved the 2nd Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, near the remnants of the village of Passchendaele. And although he was not to know it, Private Roberts had arrived just in time for the upcoming crisis.

Some four months before, at the beginning of January of 1918, having spent a snowy Christmas period spent to the south-west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion had been ordered to return to Belgium, to the Ypres Salient, for a third time.



There, as with the other British and Empire troops in the area, they were to spend much of their time building and strengthening defences.

(Right above: *an aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916 – from Illustration*)

(continued)

Meanwhile, while the Allies built their defences, by the beginning of 1918 the Germans were preparing for a final effort to win the 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 in the East now allowed them.



It was expected that the Germans would launch a spring offensive. While they were waiting, the Newfoundlanders continued to dig.

(Right above: *countryside in-between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele (today Passendale) in the vicinity of where the Newfoundlanders were stationed in March and early April of 1918 – photograph from 2011*)

The Germans did as was expected of them. Ludendorff's armies had already launched a powerful thrust on March 21, striking at first in the area of *the Somme*, overrunning the battlefields of 1916 and beyond; for a while the advance seemed unstoppable. Then a second offensive, *Georgette*, was launched in the northern sector of the front, in Flanders, where the Newfoundlanders were stationed: the date was April 9. Within two days the situation of the Allies was desperate.



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

On the day after the first heavy bombardments, April 10, as the Germans approached the towns of Armentières and Nieppe, troops were deployed to meet them. The Newfoundlanders, due to come out of the line and move back to the Somme, boarded buses at three o'clock in the afternoon and were suddenly directed southward, towards Nieppe. They were in action, attempting to stem this latest offensive, 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 were pushed back to the frontier area of France and Belgium. On the 12th of April 1st Battalion, fighting in companies rather than as a single entity, was making a series of stands.

(continued)

On April 13, during the defensive stand near the De Seule crossroads on the Franco-Belgian border, one platoon of 'C' Company was obliterated while trying to check the German advance. The remainder of 'C' Company took up defensive positions along a light railway line and, with 'A' Company, stopped a later enemy attack. 'B' and 'D' Companies – in a failed counter-attack on that evening - were equally heavily involved.



(Right above: *ground just to the east of Bailleul where 1st Battalion fought during the period April 12 to 21 – photograph from 2013*)

What exact role Private Roberts played during this frenetic period is not known - it is recorded only that he was a soldier of 'D' Company - but from April 10 to 21 was to be a difficult eleven days for all of 1st Battalion's personnel. Nevertheless, somehow, the German breakthrough never materialised and the front finally stabilised.



(Right above: *These are the De Seule crossroads almost one-hundred years later, lying astride the Franco-Belgian frontier, and also the scene of fierce fighting involving 1st Battalion on April 12 -13, 1918. Today there are several houses and a convenience store. – photograph from 2009(?)*)

Just days after the crisis had passed, on April 24, 1st Battalion officially said farewell to its comrades-in-arms of 88th Brigade and 29th Division and on the morrow participated in a recessional parade attended by the officer commanding 88th Brigade, Brigadier Freyberg. It would later be deployed to another unit, but for the summer of 1918 1st Battalion was to move a world away from Flanders where it had just fought during the German spring offensive, to be stationed on the west coast of France.

On April 29, the Newfoundlanders – 1st Battalion by now reduced to a total strength of just thirty officers and four-hundred sixty-four other ranks - took train in Belgium for the French coastal town of Étaples, where they arrived at eleven o'clock in the late evening. For now, for them, the fighting was a thing of the past.

The summer of 1918 was to pass peaceably enough for most of the personnel of 1st Battalion. For the months of May, June and until early July, the unit was posted to Écuire, to the Headquarters of Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe.

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



(continued)

The cosmetic honour of this new role, however, masked the reality that the 1st Battalion of the recently-proclaimed *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.*

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



(Right above: a view of the sparsely-populated coastal community of Équihe at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

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

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

(Right: *British troops and German prisoners in Flanders during the Hundred Days – from Illustration*)

**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.*



On October 14, 1st Battalion, having been rested for a week after heavy fighting near Ledeghem, had returned to the front for a new drive to commence on that day. The Newfoundlanders were to push along the northern bank of the River/ Canal Lys, itself north of the city of Courtrai (Kortrijk) which they were to bypass.



(continued)

The advance of the 14th was successful in gains - but the cost again high - only three hundred reporting for muster at dawn on the following morning.

(Previous page: *the Lys – both canal and river – at a point not far from the crossing-place – right to left - of October 19-20, 1918 – 1st Battalion had advanced towards the camera along the far bank. The Harlebeke Caribou (below) stands about one hundred metres behind the camera. – photograph from 2010*)

The only son of Frederick Roberts*, fisherman – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - and Susanna Roberts (deceased July 17, 1914) of Hermitage Cove, he was also brother to Bessie and Ethel.

Private Roberts was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 14, 1918, while serving with 'D' Company during fighting near the Belgian village of Drie Masten.



Cecil Roberts had enlisted at the age of eighteen years and six months.

**The 1921 Census and a gravestone record him as having married again, to Alice Sarah.*

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

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

