



Lance Corporal Frank Roberts (Regimental Number 2522), 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, Frank Roberts was a recruit of the Ninth Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on April 1, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on April 17, before attesting on the following day.



*\*A second source documents him attesting on the day of his enlistment.*

Private Roberts sailed from St. John's on July 19 on board His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian*\* (right). The ship - refitted some ten years previously to carry well over one thousand passengers - had left the Canadian port of Montreal on July 16, carrying Canadian military personnel.



It is likely that the troops disembarked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool; however, it is *certain* that upon disembarkation the contingent journeyed north by train to Scotland and to the Regimental Depot.

*\*Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport during another conflict, carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War.*

The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, there to serve as the base for the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion. It was from there – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers arriving from home were despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

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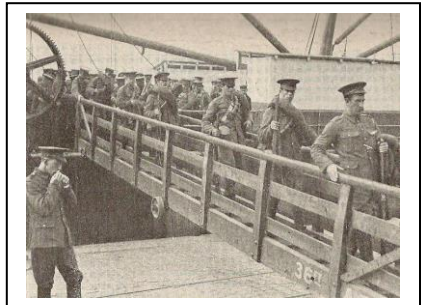
At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to accommodate the new arrivals – plus men from other regiments who were still being billeted in the area – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in Ayr itself, and the other ranks had been billeted at Newton Park School and either in the grandstand or in a tented camp at the racecourse in the suburb of Newton-upon-Ayr.



(Right above: *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*)

The 12<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Roberts among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 11 of 1916 on its way to the Continent and to the Western Front.

The contingent disembarked in the Norman capital of Rouen on the next day, October 12, and spent time at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot located there, in final training and organization\*, before making its way to a rendezvous with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.



(Right: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way 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, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

Private Roberts' contingent comprised a single officer and two-hundred twenty-six *other ranks* by the time it reported to duty at the Bernafay Wood Camp on October 22. Still in the area of Gueudecourt, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been relieved in the front line three days before, on the 19<sup>th</sup>.

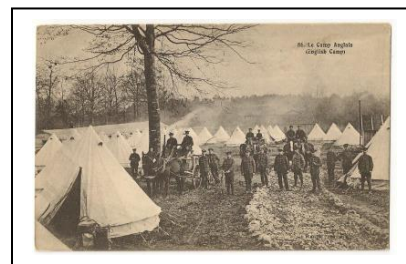


(Right: *Bernafay Wood a century later – not being close to the front lines, the wood may well have resembled what is seen here – photograph from 2014*)

After the action of October 12 at Gueudecourt, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had remained in the same area of *the Somme* and was regularly into and out of the trenches. There were no further infantry engagements, but the incessant artillery action ensured a steady stream of casualties.

The Newfoundlanders would be withdrawn from active service on or about December 12 and were to spend the following six weeks or so encamped well behind the lines and close to the city of Amiens.

(Right: a *British encampment somewhere on the Continent, apparently during the winter season – from a vintage post-card*)



After that welcome six-week Christmas-time respite away from the front lines, the Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion *officially* returned to *active service* on January 23, although they had been back in the trenches already by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

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



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

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



It was on March 29 that 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion began to make its way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, its march to finish amid the rubble of a village called Monchy-le-Preux.



(Right adjacent: *the remnants of the Grande Place in the city of Arras in early 1916 – from Illustration*)

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





The French offensive was a disaster.

(Preceding page: *the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to play its part in the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at a 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, Monchy-le-Preux was to prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war, four-hundred eighty-seven casualties on April 14 alone.



On that April 14, in the heat of the moment, Private Roberts was reported as having been *wounded in action*. It all proved to be a mistake, of course, and he was later documented as still being on duty with his unit at the end of that same day.

(Above right: *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, to the east, away from the camera.* – photograph from 2013)

The Newfoundlanders' final engagement during the *Battle of Arras* took place at *Les Fosses Farm*, on the main road between Arras and Cambrai. There were numerous casualties of which many, as ever, were the result of artillery fire. On the following day, April 24, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was withdrawn from the *Battle* and marched again towards Arras.



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

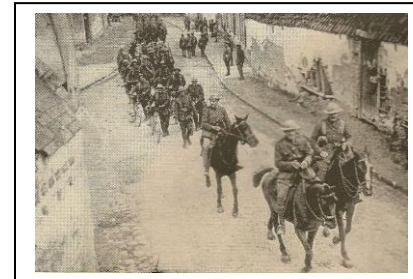
(Right: *Newfoundland troops just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux* – from *The War Illustrated*)

In contrast to the hard fighting at Monchy-le-Preux in April, May of 1917 was to be a period when the Newfoundlanders were moved hither and thither on the Arras front, in and out of the trenches. Apart from the ever-present artillery, there was little infantry activity – except for the marching.



(Right: *Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville in early May of 1917* – from *The War Illustrated*)

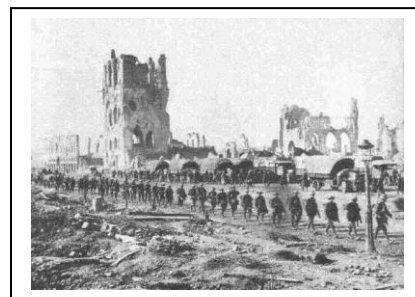
At the beginning of June, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion retired from the line to Bonneville and spent its time re-enforcing, re-organizing and training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.



The Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were once again ordered north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again to the area of *the Ypres Salient*. This had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917.

Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)



1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army which floundered its way across the sodden countryside of Flanders. Notably it fought in two major engagements, at the *Steenbeek* on August 16, and at the *Broembeek* on October 9.

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

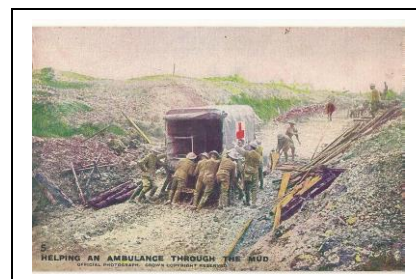


It may well be that Private Roberts played a role at the former action: it is *certain* that Lance Corporal Roberts (acting) – having been promoted in the field on August 20 - did so at the latter on October 9.

It was, in fact, only two days after his promotion that he was again reported as wounded – and on this occasion the report was true. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had relieved the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in the trenches on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and the Regimental War Diary reported that *...during this tour in the line enemy shelling was very heavy and their aircraft very active.*

On August 22, Lance Corporal Roberts was sent to the 61<sup>st</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Lozinghem\* having incurred gunshot wounds to the left hand and wrist. From there, on the morrow, he was forwarded to the 5<sup>th</sup> General Hospital, Rouen.

(Right: *transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)



*\*Several names such as Mendingham, Bandaghem and Dozinghem were invented by the British troops as they resembled the Belgian and northern-French fashion of naming villages. These sites were occupied by medical facilities only – and the inevitable cemeteries which today remain. But Lozinghem seems to be an exception in that it is a real place – however much the name lends itself to the morbid spirit of the British soldier.*

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His wounds were apparently slight, for Lance Corporal Roberts was discharged to Base Depot on September 8 and was back with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on the 18<sup>th</sup>. The Newfoundlanders had been withdrawn behind the lines since the end of August: on September 25, a week after Lance Corporal Roberts' return, they were sent back into the cauldron.

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was heavily engaged during a general offensive on October 9, just to the north of the village of Langemarck. It was there that Lance Corporal Roberts was once again wounded, on this occasion being injured in the face by flying shrapnel. He was evacuated to the 11<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance and forwarded after preliminary attention on the same day, to the 64<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Mendinghem. On the following day again, the 10<sup>th</sup>, he was sent onward to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian General Hospital at Étaples for further treatment.



(Right above: *This German Cemetery at Langemarck lies about two hundred metres behind 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's starting-off point on October 9, 1917 – photograph from 2010*)

Lance Corporal Roberts' tribulations were still far from being over: now diagnosed as having diphtheria, he was transported to the 46<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital – also at Étaples – on October 13; from there to a sick convoy on December 5; and thence to an un-named hospital ship on the same day for the short crossing back to the United Kingdom. Admitted on the 6<sup>th</sup> into the 5<sup>th</sup> London General Hospital for debility following diphtheria, he was sent for convalescence to the VAD (*Voluntary Aid Detachment*) Hospital at Ashford until the first day of the New Year, 1918.

On January 10 – those ten days, January 1 to 10, likely being the customary period of leave allowed military personnel after discharge from hospital - he reported *to duty* at the Regimental Depot at Ayr. Some two weeks later, the Newfoundlanders said their farewells to Scotland as 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion was re-stationed at the end of the month to southern England, to Hazely Down Camp, near to the historic city of Winchester – not that Lance Corporal Roberts was very long there either.



(Right above: *the High Street in Ayr, dominated then as it still is today by the imposing Wallace Tower, as shown on a postcard of the time sent home by a Newfoundland soldier – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo*)

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

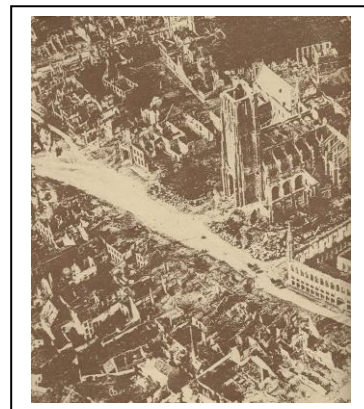


It was as a non-commissioned officer of the 37<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft that Lance Corporal Roberts embarked at Southampton on February 9, arriving in Rouen two days later on the 11<sup>th</sup>, and spending the inevitable days at the Base Depot there in final preparation before making his way with a contingent of forty-nine *other ranks* to rendezvous with 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. The newcomers reported *to duty* on February 20 in the Belgian town of Poperinghe.



Some six weeks previously, at the beginning of January of 1918, after a snowy Christmas period spent to the south-west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of 1<sup>st</sup> 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: *an aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916 – from Illustration*)



In the meantime, the Germans had been 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 difficult 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 they would launch a spring offensive.

(Right below: *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*)

On March 6 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had de-trained at Wieltje, on the north-eastern outskirts of Ypres. On the following day it moved into the line where it remained for a week, for the most part strengthening trenches and defences, and carrying supplies. No infantry action was reported but there was much of the ever-present artillery activity. At the end of the tour the War Diary entry of March 14 reports ...*Total casualties during tour in line: - Killed in action = 1 Officer, 11 Other ranks; Missing B'ld K\* = 1 Other rank; Wounded = 34 do (ditto).*



*\*believed killed*

The son of Hugh Roberts, fisherman, and of Lydia Roberts (deceased in October, 1902) of Wild Bight, Green Bay, in the District of Twillingate – his father by 1918 moved to Botwood - he was also brother to Mabel Roberts to whom he had allocated a daily sixty cents from his pay and to whom he had willed his all.

Lance Corporal Roberts was reported as *missing in action* during an enemy bombardment on March 14, 1918. Some thirty weeks later, on October 10, 1918, he was officially *presumed dead*.

Frank Roberts had enlisted at eighteen years and eight months of age.

(Right: *Oxford Road Cemetery in the vicinity of Wieltje where Lance Corporal Roberts had de-trained on March 6, 1918, on his way to the front lines – The spires of Ypres may be perceived on the horizon. – photograph from 2013*)



The photograph of Private(?) Roberts is from the Provincial Archives.



Lance Corporal Frank Roberts was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

