



Private Thomas Rodgers (Regimental Number 2632) is buried in Douai Communal Cemetery – Grave reference A. 15.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a butcher with the *St. John's Meat Co.*, and earning a monthly \$25.00, Thomas Rodgers 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 27, 1916, he then enlisted *for the duration of the war* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 – on the following day, the 28<sup>th</sup>, while also attesting at the same time.

Private Rodgers 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 port of Montreal on July 16.

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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 the 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*)

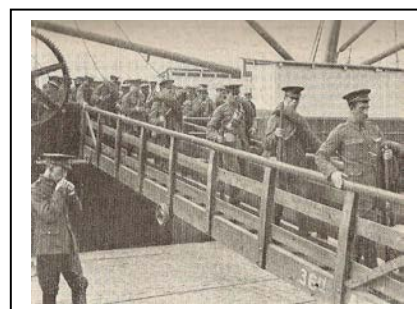
At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to accommodate the new arrivals – plus men from other regiments who were still being billeted in the area – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in Ayr itself, and the other ranks had been 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 11<sup>th</sup> Re-enforcement Draft – Private Rodgers among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on October 3 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 4, 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 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment.



(Right: *British troops disembark at Rouen on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

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*\*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.*

The contingent with which Private Rodgers reported *for duty in the field* was a large detachment of two-hundred sixty-six *other ranks* which arrived from Rouen at the Battalion transport lines on October 12. This was also the day on which the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to make its attack on the enemy positions at Gueudecourt, again sustaining heavy casualties – two-hundred thirty-nine all told - and gaining little.

Thus it was that the new-comers remained behind the lines until the 14<sup>th</sup>, two days later, when they were moved up to *Switch Trench* and parcelled out to the Battalion's four depleted fighting companies. Consequently, the date of their arrival is often recorded not as October 12 but as October 14.

*(Right: This is the ground over which 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon. This is also the area of the positions into which the re-enforcements of October 12-14 were posted. – photograph from 2007)*



After the action of October 12 at Gueudecourt, the 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 to be no 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 in *Corps Reserve* well behind the lines and close to the city of Amiens.



*(Right above: 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 the 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.

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



(Above right: *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, the latter on March 17, St. Patrick’s Day.



(Right above: *Sir Edward Morris inspects the huts housing the Newfoundland soldiery at Meaulté. – from *The War Illustrated**)

It was on March 29 that the 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 vestiges of a village called Monchy-le-Preux.



(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place in the city of Arras in early 1916: the destruction still had over two more years to run. – 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 count of casualties, some four thousand per day, 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.



While the British campaign proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be yet a further disaster.

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(Preceding page: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

The 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 – the sources differ - on April 14 alone.

(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 of the place, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)



It was during the fighting at the village of Monchy-le-Preux, during the *Battle of Arras*, that, on April 14, 1917, while serving with 'B' Company, Private Rodgers was reported as *missing in action*. Later documentation, however, released through the *Geneva Red Cross*, revealed that he had been wounded and then taken prisoner.

The son of Stephen Rodgers, watchman with *A. Goodridge & Sons*, and Anastatia Rodgers – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - of 7, Barron Street, St. John's, he was also brother to at least Annie, to Julia and to Maud.

Private Rodgers was subsequently reported as having *died of wounds* – a grenade splinter having penetrated his left side – on April 17 of 1917, in the German Field Hospital of *Ste-Clothilde* in the occupied French city of Douai.



It was apparently not until July 10 of that same 1917 that the *Pay & Record Office* in London received the news and relayed it back to Newfoundland.

Thomas Rodgers had enlisted at the age of eighteen years and six months.

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

(Right: *A family monument erected to the memory of Private Thomas Rodgers lies forlorn in Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's. – photograph from 2015(?)*)



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

