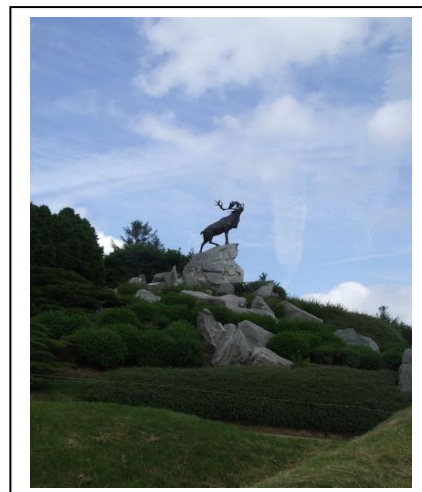


Private Eli Saunders (Regimental Number 3367), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated beneath the Caribou in Beaumont-Hamel Memorial Park.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman and lumberman, Eli Saunders was a recruit of the Eleventh Draft. Having presented himself for medical examination at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's on December 29, 1916, he then enlisted – *for the duration of the war* and at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 per diem – and also attested on that same December 29.



Private Saunders was one of the contingent of one-hundred four *other ranks* to leave St. John's on March 17, St. Patrick's Day of 1917, for the journey to Halifax. The means of their departure, however, is not clear: in one source, *The Fighting Newfoundlander*, the claim is that it was on board the Bowring Brothers vessel *Florizel*; the files of the soldiers themselves record that it was... *Embarked S.S. Train to Halifax 17/3/17...* presumably via Port-aux-Basques and thence by ferry and train again to Halifax. Other sources have not proved helpful.

It was from Halifax that the detachment made its trans-Atlantic crossing in the company of Canadian troops on board His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie* (right), sailing from Nova Scotia on March 28. Thus this draft was to reach the United Kingdom two weeks or so before the ill-fated *Windsor Draft** which had left Newfoundland at the end of January, some ten weeks earlier.



**This was the name given to the draft of about three-hundred twenty all ranks which had left St. John's on January 31, 1917, en route to Halifax from where they were to sail to the United Kingdom. This contingent would eventually make that voyage, but about thirteen weeks later than envisaged. They were quarantined at Windsor as the result of a measles and mumps epidemic that claimed two of their number – and maybe a later third. In the meantime, 2nd (Reserve) Battalion at Ayr was running low on man-power.*

Missanabie having docked in Liverpool on April 6, the Newfoundland 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 two years.



(continued)

It was from Ayr – since November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the newcomers from Newfoundland were to be despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of 1st Battalion.

By the time that the Windsor Draft arrived at the Regimental Depot, 2nd (Reserve) Battalion was becoming critically short of personnel.

(Previous page: *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)

On June 3, the 24th Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr – Private Saunders one of its number - passed through the English Channel port of Folkestone for the short sea-crossing to Boulogne on the French coast opposite. From there the Newfoundlanders entrained to travel south to Rouen and to the large British Expeditionary Force Base established there, for final organization and training* before leaving to seek out 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *a view of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)*

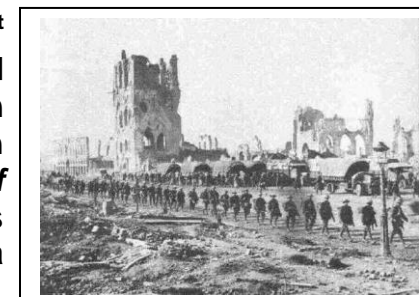
(Right: *the centre of the French city of Rouen with its venerable gothic cathedral at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)*



**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.*

Private Saunders, one of a contingent of one-hundred eighteen *other ranks* from Rouen, reported *to duty* to the parent unit on June 19, in the community of Bonneville. At the beginning of June, 1st Battalion had retired from the line to Bonneville and had spent much of that month re-enforcing, re-organizing and training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.

At the end of the month of June, the Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion were once again ordered north into Belgium 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.



(continued)

(Page preceding: *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*)

1st Battalion remained 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*)



A week after the encounter of October 9 at the *Broembeek*, the Newfoundlanders were withdrawn from the *Passchendaele* campaign in order to prepare for yet another upcoming offensive: *Cambrai*. They were ordered back south from Belgium into northern France on October 17 to re-enforce, to organize and to train in the vicinity of Berles-au-Bois, a small rural community a dozen or so kilometres to the south-west of Arras – some personnel even having been granted at the time a ten-day furlough back to the United Kingdom.

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 directly involved at all times during that period.

The battle began well for the British who used tanks on a large scale for the first time; but opportunities were squandered and by its close the British had relinquished as much territory as they had gained. 1st Battalion was again dealt with severely, at Marcoing and at Masnières - where a Caribou stands today: of the total of five-hundred fifty-eight officers and men who went into battle, two-hundred forty-eight had become casualties by the end of the second day.



(Above right: *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*)

During the Newfoundlanders' final engagement of the battle, a fighting retreat back across the *Canal St-Quentin* and beyond, Private Saunders was wounded. On December 3 he was taken to the 89th Field Ambulance having suffered a gun-shot wound to the head.

(Right above: *a British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)



(continued)

Almost immediately he was transferred to the 21st Casualty Clearing Station at Ytres from where, two days later, on December 5, he was removed further afield to the 47th General Hospital at the coastal community of Le Tréport.



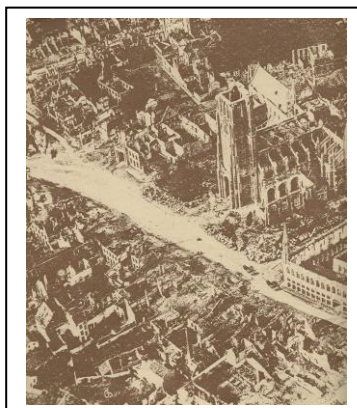
(Right: *the coastal resort of Le Tréport at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

There he remained until the 17th when he was released to the 3rd Convalescent Depot, also at Le Tréport, until the penultimate day of 1917, December 30. Private Saunders was thus to see in the New Year, 1918, at Base Details where he was posted until January 10, the day he reported back to 1st Battalion. On that date, 1st Battalion was in the process of spending the best part of two weeks in the northern French commune of Zudausques on its slow progress back to the Ypres Salient.



(Right above: *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*)

At the close of the *Battle of Cambrai* at the beginning of December of 1917, 1st Battalion – once again badly under-strength due to the heavy casualties incurred – was withdrawn from the area of the front lines to re-enforce and to re-organize. The following weeks were spent at first to the south-west of the city of Arras, at Humbercourt and then at some distance to the north-west, at Fressin. The weather obliged and allowed the Newfoundlanders some snow, a bit too much at times, apparently.



At the beginning of January of 1918, and after that snowy Christmas period spent to the west of Arras and withdrawn from the front, the Newfoundlanders of 1st Battalion were ordered 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: *an aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916 – from Illustration*)

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.

(Page preceding: *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*)

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



On, April 10, the day after the first heavy bombardments, as the Germans approached the towns of Armentières and Nieppe, troops were deployed to meet them. The Newfoundlanders, due at the time to come out of the line and move back to *the Somme* to stem the German flow there, boarded buses at three o'clock in the afternoon but then 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.

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



On April 13, during the defensive confrontation 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.

(continued)

What exact role Private Saunders played is not known - it is only recorded that he was a soldier of 'D' Company – although it should be said that this company played a major role in repulsing a German attack at the De Seule Crossroads on the evening of the 13th. 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.

The son of Adam Saunders – to whom he had allocated a daily fifty cents from his pay - and Mary Ann Saunders (née *Ginn*) of little Ward's Harbour Point Leamington, Notre Dame Bay – he was also brother to Lewis and to Lavinia, and step-brother to Adam, Gladys-Mary, Winnifred, Jessie, William, Sara and to Archable (sic)*.



Private Saunders was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 13, 1918, while serving with 'D' Company during fighting to the south of the Belgian town of Neuve-Église on the Franco-Belgian border.

Born on September 14, 1897, according to the 1911 census, Eli Saunders was apparently older than the eighteen years and six months declared at the time of his enlistment.

**His mother, Mary Ann, died at some point after the birth of Lavinia in 1901. Adam Saunders, his father, was to be re-married, to Bessie Bennett, in 1907. During the 1911 Census the family was living in Little Ward's Harbour.*

(Right above: *These are the De Seule crossroads, 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(?)*)



The photograph of Private Saunders is from the Royal Canadian Legion publication *Lest We Forget*.

Private Eli Saunders was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and also the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

