



Second Lieutenant James Elliot Thomson (Regimental Number 61) is interred in Sully-Saillisel British Cemetery: Grave reference, I. D. 2..

His occupation recorded in his papers as *none*, yet also citing a weekly income of twenty dollars, James Elliott Thomson was a volunteer of the First Recruitment Draft. He presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland for a medical examination on August 28 of 1914. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.**

(continued)

****The building was to serve as the Regimental Headquarters in Newfoundland for the duration of the conflict.***

Five days later, James Elliott Thomson returned to enlist at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on September 2, 1914, and was engaged...***but for only a year's service*****...at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar to which would then be added a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

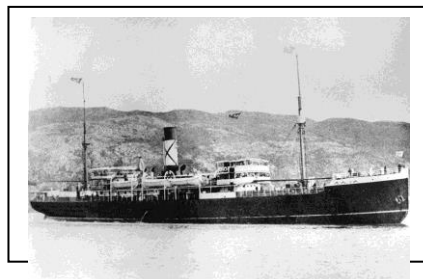
*****At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the 'Duration' at the time of their original enlistment.***

He was now to await a further twenty-nine days before undergoing the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On that first day of the month of October of 1914 he and a goodly number of his fellow recruits pledged their individual allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, James Elliott Thomson became...***a soldier of the King.***

Only days following that attestation, the first Newfoundland contingent of 'A' and 'B' Companies, to be known to posterity collectively as *The First Five Hundred* as well as *The Blue Puttees* was to march through the city and down to the harbour to take ship to the United Kingdom. Thus it was that on that October 3 Private Thomson was to board the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel**.

****The ship did not sail, in fact, until the morrow as it was awaiting the passage of the convoy transporting the 1st Canadian Division overseas which it joined off the south coast of the Island.***

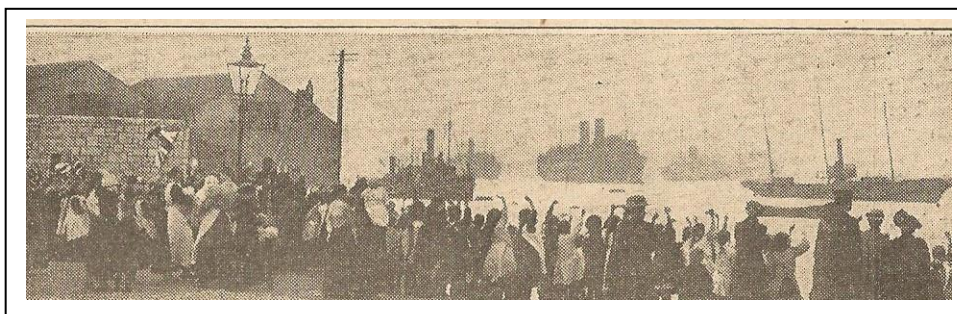
(Right: *The photograph of 'Florizel' in St. John's Harbour in that October of 1914 is by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum in Mount Pearl.*)



Florizel reached England on October 14, but once more the Newfoundlanders were obliged to wait. The port had not been expecting to receive the convoy and the Newfoundlanders were to remain on board *Florizel* for six days until, on October 20, they finally disembarked in Devonport on the English south coast*.

****It was an inconvenience that a goodly number of their Canadian comrades-in-arms were to share with them.***

(continued)



(Preceding page: *A crowd of the curious watches the ships which had carried the Canadians and the Newfoundlanders across the ocean as they enter the harbour of Plymouth-Devonport. It is the last day of the second week of October, 1914. – from The War Illustrated*)

Once in the United Kingdom the first Newfoundland contingent was to now spend some ten months undergoing further training*: firstly in southern England– as a private for only five day, until October 25, when he received promotion to the rank of lance-corporal - on the Salisbury Plain close to historic Stonehenge ; then in Scotland at Fort George; later at Edinburgh Castle; and finally at *Stobs Camp* near the Scottish town of Hawick.

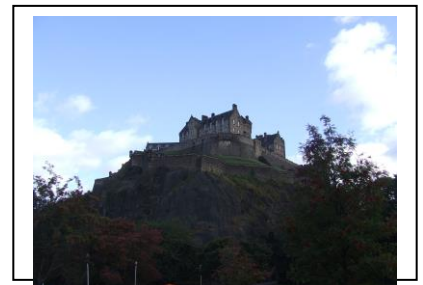


(Right above: *Fort George, built on the Firth of Moray near to Inverness, was built after the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. It serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)

****It would have seen...active service...sooner, except that the Newfoundland government wanted its men to serve as a single Newfoundland entity. A battalion was the smallest independent unit in the British Army and thus the Newfoundland Regiment had to wait until it numbered fifteen hundred – the number necessary to man such a force. It would not happen until the following summer (see further below).***

(Right below: *The venerable bastion of Edinburgh Castle dominates the Scottish capital from its hill in the centre of the city. – photograph from 2011*)

Only days after ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies, the first contingent which had arrived overseas in October of 1914, had taken up their posting in Edinburgh, the Scottish capital city, on February 16 of 1915, ‘C’ Company – the first re-enforcements for this original contingent - would report 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 large enough in numbers to comprise a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.***

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 according to Captain Ayre in a letter 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.



(Preceding page: *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)

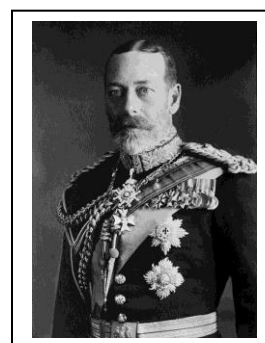
This, of course, had been an all-important moment: the Company's arrival was to bring the Newfoundland Regiment's numbers to some fifteen hundred, establishment strength* of a battalion which could be posted on...*active service.*

**A number sufficient for four 'fighting' companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

(Right: *The men of the Regiment await their new Lee-Enfield rifles.* – original photograph from the *Provincial Archives*)



Weeks later, at the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', having by that time become the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, were then sent south to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot; meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived 'E' and 'F', were sent to Scotland's west coast, to the town and once-Royal Borough of Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the first reserves to be dispatched to the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, and also the first soldiers of a proposed 2nd Battalion (see below).



(Right above: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)

(Right: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on-Ayr, where were quartered the 'other ranks', is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right.* – by courtesy of the *Carnegie Library at Ayr*)



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.

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(Right below: *The High Street in Ayr as shown on a postcard of the time, the imposing Wallace Tower – it stands to this day (2017) - dominating the scene – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo.*



The four senior companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', had in the summer of 1915 become 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 Battalion had soon been dispatched from *Camp Aldershot* to...*active service*.

On August 20 of that 1915, the Newfoundland unit had embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Plymouth-Devonport onto the requisitioned White Star passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to serve in the fighting against the Turks.



(Right: *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.)*

(Right: *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, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea a month later – and by that time 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*.

(Right: *'Kangaroo Beach', where the officers and men of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is to be seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a landing-craft are still clearly visible in the foreground on 'A' Beach. – photograph taken in 2011)*



(Right: *A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where the 1st Battalion was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)*



When the Newfoundlanders had landed from their transport ships at *Kangaroo Beach, 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.

(Right: *This is Anzac Bay in the fore-ground with the Salt Lake in the centre further away. The bottom of Suvla Bay is just to be seen on the left and adjacent to the Salt Lake, and further away again. The hills in the distance and the ones from which this photograph was taken were held by the Turks and formed a horse-shoe around the plain surrounding the Salt Lake - which was where the British and Newfoundlanders were stationed. – photograph from 2011*)



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: *No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – 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.

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



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.

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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: *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: *'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: *'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.

(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*)



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

**Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was already becoming a theatre of war.*

It was during this period spent re-organizing the Newfoundland Battalion at Suez that on February 27 Lance Corporal Thomson put up his second (*corporal's*) chevron.

After the two-month interim to be 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: *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: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseille. – from a vintage post-card*)

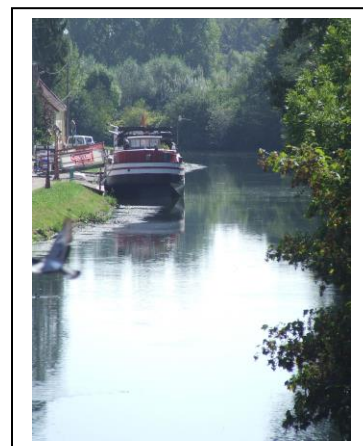


Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseille.

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.

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.



(Preceding page: *A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)

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 the forward area on April 22. The Newfoundlanders were also soon to be preparing for the British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for that same meandering river, *the Somme*.



(Right above: *A further part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?)*)

Another promotion was now forthcoming for Corporal Thomson: whether he had been promoted in the interim to the rank of sergeant is not recorded, likely not, but on June 5 he received an Imperial Commission and was appointed to be Second Lieutenant Thomson – his pay now increasing to the rate of two dollars per diem. This is the date on which, in fact, *twelve* second lieutenants were to be commissioned, having just completed a finishing course for officers at the *Bull Ring* at Étaples, on the west coast of France.

It is not certain, however, that Lieutenant Thomson had been one of that number, instead having been commissioned *in the field* – but this is perhaps a point of little import.



**Perhaps of interest is 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*)

(Right below: *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 & 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.



On July 1, 1916, the first day of *The Somme*, Lieutenant Thomson was included on the nominal roll of the 1st Battalion but did not, however, figure in the fighting during the morning at Beaumont-Hamel. The most likely explanation for this is that he was one of the ten per cent of fourteen officers and eighty-three *other ranks* held back in the community of Louvencourt on that date, before being ordered forward to the field into the support trenches only in the early afternoon when the worst of the fighting had for the most part abated*.

****The majority of personnel held in reserve or who were otherwise employed on that day were documented as being with the 1st Battalion on July 4, giving the unwarranted impression that they had not served in any capacity whatsoever on July 1. In fact, the same applies to those who had survived the fighting and who answered the roll call on the morning of July 2*.***



(Right: Yet another scene of the re-constituted battle-field in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))

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Days later, on July 11, Lieutenant Thomson was on his way back to England to take ship, *Corinthian* from the Port of London on July 20, across the Atlantic to Québec – where it docked on August 1. Thence he travelled onward to Newfoundland, the reason in his papers recorded simply as...*duty*, thus likely the one cited below: troop escort.



Some six weeks later again, on August 28, he was on his way back across to the United Kingdom, accompanying a draft of two-hundred forty-two recruits, on board the *SS Sicilian* (right above), the ship's third and final such passage of that year.

There appear to be no documents pertaining to Lieutenant Thomson from the time of his arrival in Devonport on or about September 9 on board *Sicilian* until the last week in October. It might be therefore surmised that having accompanied his charges to Scotland, he then remained for the next six weeks serving at the Regimental Depot at Ayr.



(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)



On November 1, 1916, Lieutenant Thomson was one of five officers to report to the Newfoundland Battalion from the depot at the coastal town of Étapes. His unit was at the time in *Corps Reserve* at Ville-sous-Corbie after its efforts – and losses – in the fighting at Gueudecourt on October 12. On what date he had traversed the Channel to return to the Continent is not clear, although a solitary memo which reports him in London on that date

makes it perhaps more than likely to have been October 27, perhaps accompanying a small re-enforcement draft of ten *other ranks* from Ayr.

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In the meantime, after the events four months before 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 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 Somme 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*.

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(Preceding page: *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*)

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.

(Right: *The same re-constructed ramparts as shown above, viewed from just outside the city walls and the far side of the moat which still partially surrounds the place – image from 2010*)



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.

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The unit was thereupon to be transported by train back into France, back into the area of the...*First Battle of – the Somme.*

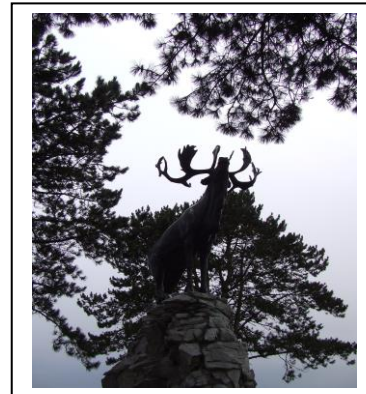
Just four days after unit's return to France from Belgium, on October 12 of 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to take to the offensive; it was at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.



(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.

(Right: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's advance of October 12, 1916.* – photograph from 2012)



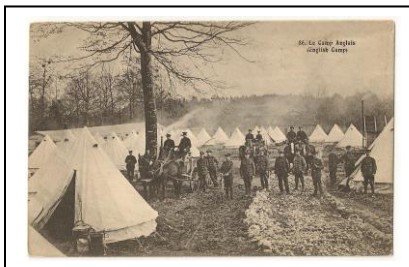
The Newfoundland Battalion was not then to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it had furnished two-hundred fifty men to act as stretcher-bearers in an attack undertaken by troops of two British regiments, the Hampshires and the Worcestershires, of the 88th Infantry Brigade of which, of course, the Newfoundland unit was a battalion.

(Right: *Stretcher-bearers not only shared the dangers of the battle-field with their arms-bearing comrades, but they often spent a longer period of time exposed to those same perils. This photograph was likely taken during First Somme.* – from *Illustration*)



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.



(Right above: *A typical British Army Camp during rather inclement winter conditions somewhere on the Continent* – from a vintage post-card)

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And, as recorded in an earlier paragraph, it had been at Ville-sous-Corbie on November 1 that (2nd) Lieutenant Thompson and his fellow officers having arrived from Étapes, had reported to the Newfoundland Battalion.

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After the period spent at Corbie, back at *the Front* the Newfoundland unit had then 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*...- having 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.



(Preceding page: 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 Sully-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 Sully-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 withdrawn on February 25...to return three days later.



The Battalion had by then been carrying with it orders for a...*bombing raid*...on the enemy positions at Sully-Saillisel...to be carried out on March 1.

(Right above: *The fighting during the period of the Battalion's posting to Sully-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 Sully-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 Sully-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.

And it would also bring to a close that of (2nd) Lieutenant Thomson.

The son of Charles Robertson Thomson (of the *Sudbury Seal & Leather Manufacturing Company*, and manager of the *Newfoundland Boot & Shoe Factory*) and of Mary Ann Thomson (née *Elliott) of *Sudbury*, Water Street West in St. John's (later, by 1921, of Muswell Hill, London, SW 10), he was also brother to Arthur-Roland, Stella-Walton, Charles-Moncrief** and to Florence-Beatrice.**

****The couple had been married in St. John's on July 2, 1884.***

*****His younger brother Charles Moncrief enlisted in May of 1915 and sailed to the United Kingdom a month later. He had then been a soldier of the 2nd Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr which had reported to the parent 1st Battalion in France on April 8 of 1916. Private Thomson was injured at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916: a gun-shot wound to the leg. He eventually returned to his unit in September of 1917 and perhaps served during the latter part of Passchendaele and then at Cambrai. After this he was to spend a great deal of time in medical care before being sent to England in November of 1918, considered by that time as fit only for...light duty. He took ship back to Newfoundland on January 30, 1919, was***

deemed by a Medical Board to be permanently unfit, and was discharged from service on March 19 of the same year.

An excerpt from the 1st Battalion War Diary entry for March 2 reads: *B Co were reinforced by one platoon of A. All our trenches were subjected to a heavy and accurate bombardment all during the day, particularly B Co. in PALZ TRENCH in the afternoon... 2/LT Thomson and 1 O.R. reported missing...*

Lieutenant Thomson was at first reported as...*missing in action...*while serving with 'A' Company on March 2, 1917, at Sully-Saillisel.

However, a subsequent report submitted by the 2nd Battalion, Coldstream Guards, recorded the identification and burial of Lieutenant Thomson's remains sixteen days later, on March 19. His personal documents were thus amended so as to read...*killed in action 3/3/17**.



**Nevertheless, the War Diary entry cites March 2.*

James Elliot Thomson had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-two years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, October 4, 1891 (from Roman Catholic Parish Records).

(Right above: *The photograph of Private(?) Thomson is from the Provincial Archives.*)

(2nd) Lieutenant James Elliot Thomson was entitled to (left to right) the 1914-1915 Star, the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



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 – February 1, 2023.