

**Second Lieutenant Gerald Walter Ayre (Regimental Number 869\*), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Park at Beaumont-Hamel.**



*\*Officers who were eventually promoted from the ranks may be identified from their Regimental Number. Other officers who were not from the ranks received the King's Commission, or in the case of those in the Newfoundland Regiment, an Imperial Commission, and were not considered as enlisted. These officers thus had no Regimental Number allotted to them.*

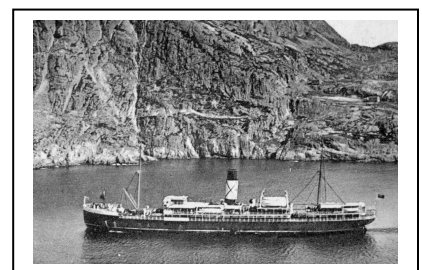
*And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist 'for the duration', even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.*

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of salesman with *Ayre & Sons Co. Ltd.* of Water Street, Gerald Walter Ayre enlisted at the Church Lads Brigade Armoury on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on January 2, 1915 – engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

A month previous to this, on December 3, he had presented himself at the same venue for medical examination. It had been a procedure which would pronounce him to be...*Fit for Foreign Service.*

Now, some eight weeks after enlistment, on February 24, Private Ayre was to be promoted directly to the rank of corporal.

It was as an NCO of 'D' Company, the second re-enforcement draft to leave Newfoundland, that Corporal Ayre sailed for overseas service on the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* from St. John's to Halifax on March 20.

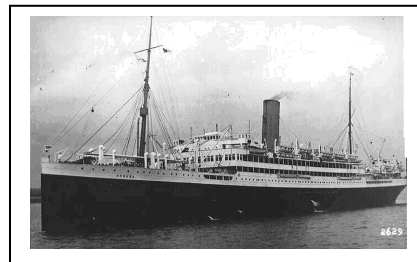


*(Right above: The photograph of Stephano sailing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is from the Provincial Archives.)*

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From Nova Scotia on March 22 of that 1915, the draft was to take passage to the United Kingdom on board the requisitioned steamship *Orduña* to the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool where the vessel was to arrive eight days later.

(Right: *The recently-built Orduña – constructed in 1913-1914 - was requisitioned during the Great War for use as an armed merchant cruiser and also as a troop transport. The ship involved with the unfortunate Jewish refugees in the ‘Voyage of the Damned’ affair, she was later also to be used as a troopship and an evacuation transport during the conflict of 1939-1945 before being finally laid up in 1950. – photograph from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*



Upon its arrival in England ‘D’ Company immediately entrained to travel north to the Scottish capital of Edinburgh where it was re-united on March 30 with ‘A’, ‘B’ Companies of the Newfoundland contingent which had recently arrived from Fort George, further to the north of Scotland near Inverness, and with ‘C’ Company which had earlier also travelled directly from Liverpool to Edinburgh.

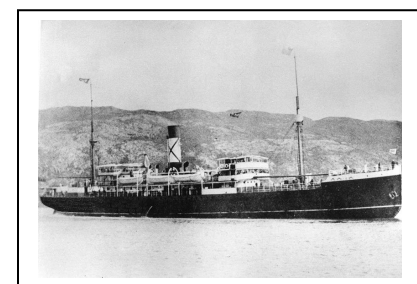


(Right above: *The venerable bastion of Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011)*

\* \* \* \* \*

Some seven months earlier at the beginning of September, 1914, a four-week period of training on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the East End of St. John’s had begun for the hundreds of young volunteers who had answered the call to ‘the Colours’ by that time, or who were soon to do so. These men were to become ‘A’ Company and ‘B’ Company of the Newfoundland Regiment.

On October 3, the personnel of the Newfoundland contingent – the force was not yet a battalion – to become known to history as the *First Five Hundred* – and also as the *Blue Puttees* – paraded through the capital city and then embarked onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Florizel* awaiting them in St. John’s Harbour.



The ship would sail for the United Kingdom on the following day, October 4, via its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.

(Right above: *The image of Florizel at anchor in the harbour at St. John’s is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.*)

In the United Kingdom, during the late autumn and into that winter ‘A’ and ‘B’ Company were to train in various locales: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to the city of Inverness and the well-known Loch Ness; before then being ordered to the Castle at Edinburgh where they arrived on February 19 of 1915.

The two companies were now to garrison the venerable Castle – the first troops from outside the British Isles to perform that duty – and to await re-enforcements from home, although ‘C’ Company had apparently preceded them by three days.

As seen above, Corporal Ayre’s ‘D’ Company arrived at the end of March and ‘E’ Company some five weeks later again, on May 4.



(Right above: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)

\* \* \* \* \*

On May 11 the Newfoundlanders were transferred to a tented *Stobs Camp*, in the vicinity of the Scottish town of Hawick, where they were to undergo further training and exercises for some three months.

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915 – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot.

Meanwhile, the two junior Companies, ‘E’ and the last-arrived ‘F’ were ordered posted to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion\*.

(Right: *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*)



*\*On July 10, 1915, ‘F’ Company had arrived at ‘Stobs Camp’ from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service.*

Corporal Ayre was promoted to the rank of sergeant on June 14, 1915, while the Newfoundland Regiment was still under canvas at *Stobs Camp*. It was also there that he was granted his Imperial Commission, on July 29, and the accompanying appointment to the rank of second lieutenant.

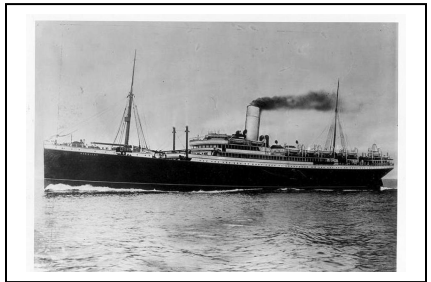
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At the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, the Regimental Depot was during the summer of 1915 in the throes of being established as a base for the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which, from that time on, was to despatch re-enforcements to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, at first to the Middle East and later to the *Western Front* in France and Belgium.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on-Ayr, where were for the most part were quartered the ‘other ranks’, is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were often housed the officers in Wellington Square, is to the right. – by courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

Second Lieutenant Ayre was not, however, to travel to the Middle East; nor is it likely that he reported to the Regimental Depot at Ayr. On August 6 of that summer of 1915, he boarded ship in Liverpool for the trans-Atlantic passage back to Newfoundland – certainly via an unspecified Canadian port (but see \* immediately below) – where he arrived on the 20<sup>th</sup> of that same month. The reason for his travel seems not to be recorded\*.



*\*It is possible that the vessel in question was HMT Corsican (right above) which sailed from Liverpool on August 7 and which docked at Québec on the 17<sup>th</sup>. From there it was usually by a combination of train and ferry that travellers reached St. John’s.*

In an undated letter that he wrote to the *Pay & Record Office* in London, Second Lieutenant Ayre states that from about October 28, 1915, until February 28 of the following year, 1916, he had been Acting Adjutant at Headquarters in St. John’s, temporarily replacing Captain Montgomerie.

He, Second Lieutenant Ayre, apparently had subsequently left Newfoundland for *overseas service* again in the company of the remainder – the first hundred personnel having already departed some three months prior, on December 15 - of ‘H’ Company on March 23, 1916, travelling to Halifax on *Florizel*, before embarking onto an unidentified vessel for the ocean crossing to the United Kingdom.



Upon arrival – the evidence is another undated letter – he travelled to Ayr, to be posted to *duty* there – and housed at Wellington Square - for some four weeks.

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

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The records indicate that Second Lieutenant Ayre embarked from England for the short crossing to France to join the British Expeditionary Force\* in France on June 5. He appears to have been one of a number of officers who were to pass through London on that date on the way to the Continent. The date on which Lieutenant Ayre re-joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, however, is not to be found among his papers.



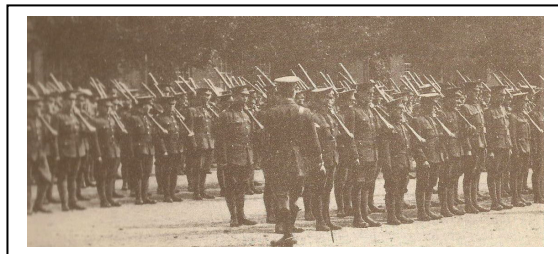
(Right above: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *A part of the reconstructed trench system in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007*)



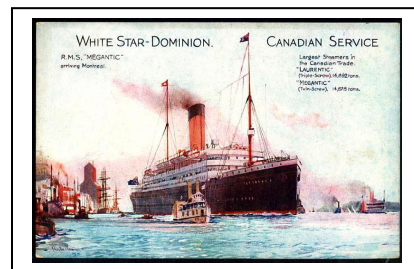
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At this time, during those several months of Sergeant (later Second Lieutenant) Ayre’s posting to Ayr, the four senior companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, having become the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, had thereupon been attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and had been despatched to active service.



(Right above: *Some of the personnel of ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to leaving for active service – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)*

On August 20, 1915, the Newfoundland unit had embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport on England’s south coast, onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks. There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had landed at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *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: *Kangaroo Beach, where the personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a landing-craft are clearly visible in the foreground on ‘A’ Beach. – photograph taken in 2011*)



**(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)**



**When the Newfoundland Battalion landed from its transport ship at *Suvla Bay* it disembarked into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.**

**Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion would 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*, was to prove 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 which 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 the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.**

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

**\*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.**

**November 26 would see 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.**

**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.**

**On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard. Some of the Battalion personnel had 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.**



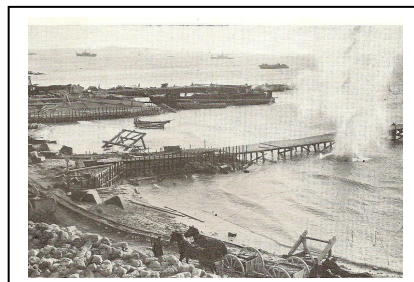
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**(Preceding page: Cape Helles as seen from the Turkish positions on the misnamed Achi Baba, positions which were never breached: The Newfoundland positions were to the right-hand side of the picture. – photograph from 2011)**

**The British and the Anzac forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at Gallipoli – were now to be only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the Peninsula could be undertaken.**

**(Right: ‘W’ Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – from Illustration)**



**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.**

**\*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 – with General Maude - to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.**



**(Right above: ‘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)**

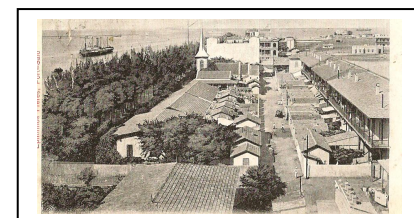
**Immediately after the British had evacuated the entire Gallipoli Peninsula in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, arriving there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to the vicinity of Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division had yet to be decided\*.**



**\*Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.**

**(Right above: The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 from Illustration)**

**After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and other ranks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were to board His Majesty’s Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage through the Suez Canal en route to France.**



The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles, on March 22.

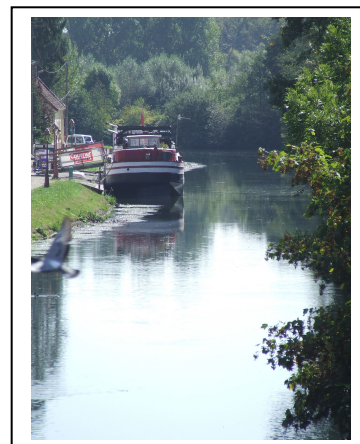
(Preceding page: *Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal as it was just prior to the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

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 Marseilles. 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 over which they had then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* would become a part of their history.

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



On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> 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*.

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 was to then be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.

*\*It should be said that the Newfoundland Battalion and two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles who were serving at the time in the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*

Having then been withdrawn, at the end of that April after the completion of their first tour in the trenches to the areas of Maily-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing – this to include the construction of a light railway in the Louvencourt area - for the now-impending British campaign of that summer to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, flowing sedately – as it still does today – through the region on its journey to the sea.

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**(Right: A further part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – 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\*.

**(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 is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009)**



**(Right: A view of Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?))**



**\*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.**

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 largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the butchery of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.

**(Right: Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village. – photographs from 2010 and 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.**



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(Right: A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland - dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel – from... )



The son of Frederick William Ayre, a Managing Director of Ayre & Sons, and of Mary Julia Ayre (née Pitts, deceased August 22, 1903) of Circular Road in St. John's, he was brother to Dora-Gertrude, to Arthur-William, Harold Cecil, Charles-Robert, Ruby-Edith, James-Stewart and Marjorie-Pitts\*.

Second Lieutenant Ayre was reported as *missing in action* on July 1, 1916, at Beaumont-Hamel during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*. Some six months later, on December 31, he was officially *presumed dead*.

*\*Frederick William Ayre married again and with his second wife had two further children.*

Second Lieutenant Ayre died at the age of twenty-five years\*.

*\*Gerald Ayre was one of four family members to die on that day, the others all his cousins: Wilfrid and Eric of the Newfoundland Regiment, and Bernard (brother of Eric) of the Norfolk Regiment\*.*



*\*See elsewhere in these files.*

*(The photograph of Lieutenant Ayre is from the Provincial Archives.)*

Second Lieutenant Gerald Walter Ayre was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).

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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 11, 2023.

