



Private Birkley (found elsewhere as *Berkeley*) Piercey (Regimental Number 421), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



His occupations previous to military service recorded as those of both *fisherman* and *sometime-carpenter* earning approximately four-hundred fifty dollars annually, Birkley Piercey presented himself for medical examination at St. George's on the west coast of Newfoundland on August 31, 1914. It was a procedure which was to assess him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

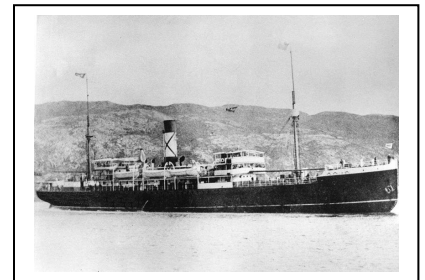
In 1908 he had also joined the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve, his Number 447x, in which he had then served for three years - according to a letter written by his father - although this would have been for only a short period per annum, not continuous service. Apparently - once more according to his father - by the time that the Royal Navy had called for him to serve in the war, he had already enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment and had departed for service overseas.

Three days later, on September 3, - and after a trans-island train-ride - Birkeley Piercey reported to the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, there to enlist, whereupon he was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*. A recruit of the First Draft, he was likely now ordered to the tented area by that time established on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the East End of St. John's where a four-five week course of training was already under way.

The regimental authorities were *also* busy by now, preparing for the transport of this, the first body of volunteers, to *overseas* - and later to *active - service*.

At the beginning of the month of October a large number of the new recruits underwent attestation; Private Piercey was one of that number, taking his oath of allegiance on the first day of October.

Two days later, after the Newfoundland contingent - it was not as yet a battalion - of 'A' and 'B' Companies had paraded through the city, it embarked onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* which was awaiting in St. John's Harbour.



(continued)

Private Piercey and his comrades-in-arms of the *First Five Hundred* – also to be known to history as the *Blue Puttees* – were now to sit on board ship for the best part of a day as it was not to be until the morrow that *Florizel* would sail to the south coast of the Island and to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the Canadian Division to the United Kingdom.

(Preceding page: *The image of Florizel at anchor in the harbour at St. John's is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.*)

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

In the United Kingdom this first Newfoundland contingent was to train in three venues during the late autumn of 1914 and then the winter of 1914-1915: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; and lastly at Edinburgh Castle where the unit was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.



(Right below: *The venerable Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill.* – photograph from 2011)

Some three months later, on May 11, and some seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit – by now ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies re-enforced by ‘C’, ‘D’, and ‘E’ - was ordered moved from the Scottish capital to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.



It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent received the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus rendered ready to be ordered on ‘active service’.

**The number was about fifteen hundred, sufficient to provide four ‘fighting’ companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

(Right: *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 Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)

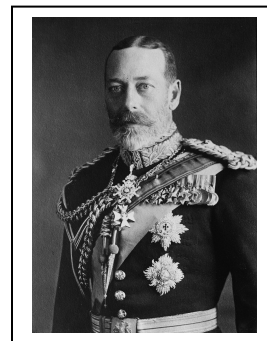


At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ – Private Piercey among their ranks - were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot.

This force, now designated as the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

Meanwhile the two junior companies, the later-arrived 'E' and the aforementioned last-arrived 'F', were ordered transferred to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (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* – the photograph is from *Bain News Services* via the *Wikipedia* web-site.)



It was also during this period while at Aldershot that on August 14 Private Piercey was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion for the duration of the war*.

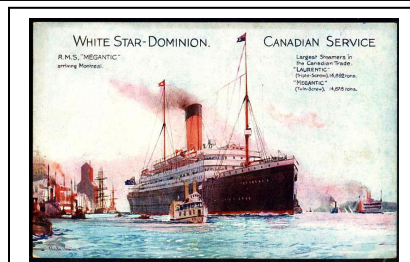
**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was likely to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

(Right: *Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to its departure to active service on the Gallipoli Peninsula* – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)



While 'E' and 'F' Companies were beginning their posting to the Regimental Depot at Ayr, on August 20 of 1915 the 1st Battalion embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Plymouth-Devonport onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks.

(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.*)

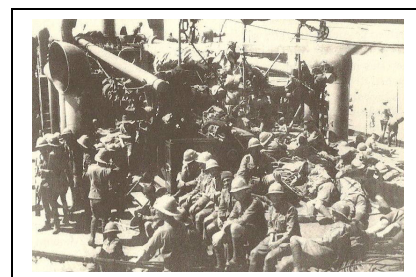


There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the 1st Battalion, 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: Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli – Dardanelles to the French, Çanakkale to the Turks. – from Provincial Archives)



(Right below: 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 landed from their transport ship at Suvla Bay on that September night of 1915 they would disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.



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



(Right above: No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from Provincial Archives)

(Right below: 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; a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm was to 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.

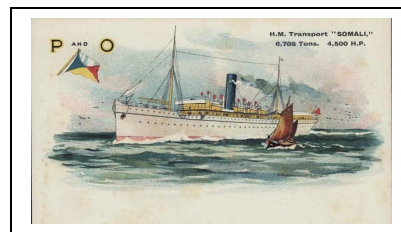


There were to be many casualties on both sides, some of them, surprised by the sudden inundation of their positions, fatalities who had drowned in their trenches – although no

Newfoundlanders were to be among that number. Numerous, however, were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

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On December 14, 1915, Private Piercey was admitted into the 26th Casualty Clearing Station at *Suvla Bay* and diagnosed as suffering from dysentery. Some ten days later, His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Somali* – by that time with Private Piercey on board – sailed from the Gallipoli Peninsula to the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta where it arrived on or about December 29.



(Right above: *The image of a peace-time 'Somali' before the Great War is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The ship had been completed in 1901 to serve as a passenger vessel with the P&O Steam Navigation Company which she had done until February of 1915 when she was requisitioned for conversion into a hospital ship. In April of 1916 she reverted to the role of a troop-transport, a role she continued to play until after the end of the conflict. 'Somali' was scrapped in 1923.*)

Private Piercey was admitted - on the same 29th - into St. Paul's Military Hospital where he would remain for some three weeks receiving treatment before he was transferred to the *All Saints' Convalescent Camp*, also on the island, on January 17 of the New Year, 1916.

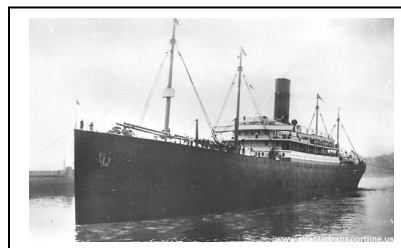


(Right: *Some of the many now-disused and abandoned Royal Navy medical facilities on the once-British-held island-possession of Malta, independent since 1964 – photograph from 2011*)

From the convalescent camp the records show Private Piercey transferred to *Forrest Hospital* on March 11, by this time having been diagnosed as having a venereal problem; from there on March 25 he was forwarded to duty to the nearby *Ghain Tuffeiha Convalescent Camp*, there likely to perform light tasks.

Once more considered *fit for active service* he is recorded as having sailed from Malta on April 7, 1916, on board His Majesty's Transport *Minnetonka*.* However, it is not clear from his dossier where Private Piercey was during the following two weeks as *Minnetonka* was not likely to take that amount of time to make the passage from Malta to Marseilles.

It may be that he was to travel via Alexandria but this is only speculation...or perhaps he was to remain on Malta and *Minnetonka* sailed on a later date: more speculation.



**Although, during the latter part of this period he may have been briefly receiving treatment for an undisclosed problem in St. Barnabas' Hospital.*

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The photograph of HMT Minnetonka is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Private Piercey disembarked in the French Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles on April 21, 1916, before being transferred to the British Expeditionary Force Depot at Rouen, where he was admitted into the 12th General Hospital on May 1, and then transferred the following day, May 2, to the 9th Stationary in Le Havre. The diagnosis was NYD (*papilloma*) – *not yet determined (benign growths)* and he was discharged from there nine days later, on May 11, to go back to Rouen to the Base Depot.

Private Piercey was once more admitted into the 12th General Hospital in Rouen on May 30 and, as had been the case weeks before, was transferred on the following day, May 31, to the 9th Stationary Hospital in Le Havre where the diagnosis was delivered: a recurring case of that venereal complaint (warts).



It was not to be until some two months later, on July 29, that he was discharged once more *to duty* to the Base Depot in Rouen.

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

Private Piercey's files record him reporting *to duty* with the Newfoundland Battalion in Belgium on September 1, therefore likely having been a soldier of the detachment of ten *other ranks* that the Regimental War Diarist reports as having arrived on August 31.

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In the meantime, on the night of December 19-20, 1915, - some three weeks after the departure of Private Piercey for medical attention - 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 1st Battalion was to 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 now only 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 as it was 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 had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, to arrive there on the 15th 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 29th 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 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* from *Illustration*)



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

After a two-month interim 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 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.



(Right above: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles.* – from a vintage post-card)

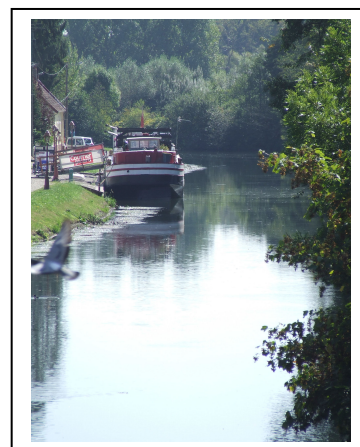
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Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, 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* was to become a part of their history.

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

On April 13, the 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 reinforcements 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 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 below: *A part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?)*)

Having then been withdrawn at the end of that April to the areas of Mailly-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing for the upcoming British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, that flowed – and still does so today – through the region.



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: *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 above: *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.



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

After the events 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 a German counter-assault might well annihilate what had managed to survive of the British Expeditionary Force on *the Somme*.

The few 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.

It had then been 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 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 on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven reinforcements – 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 manpower having arrived, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14th of July, 1916, the 1st Battalion still numbered only...*11 officers and 260 rifles...after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.*

On July 27-28 of 1916, the 1st Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong, even after further re-enforcement – had moved north and entered into the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

It 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: *The entrance to 'A' Company's quarters – obviously renovated since that time - in the ramparts of the city of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)

August 31, 1916, had been a further day in the trenches for the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment. The preceding days had apparently been rainy as the Battalion War Diarist reported in his journal that the trenches in question were beginning to dry out. He also noted in his brief entry of the day that...*Draft of 10 O.R. arrived from Base.*

Private Piercey was back on *active service*.

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The Salient – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict and one of the most lethal postings of the entire conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders' posting there; yet they nonetheless incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.

Then on October 8, having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the Newfoundland unit was ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.



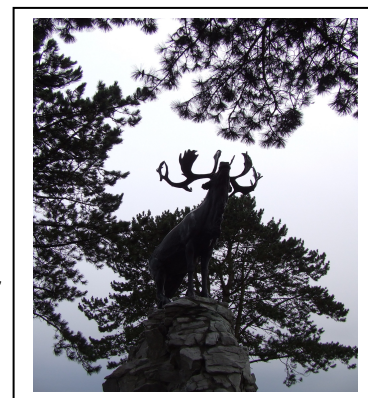
(Preceding page: An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the 'Ville morte'. – from Illustration)

Four days after that return to France, on October 12, 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment would again be ordered to the offensive; it was to be at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.



The encounter again proved to be an ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred and thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain.

(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)



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

Among the wounded of that day was Private Piercey who had suffered gun-shot wounds to his fingers and was subsequently admitted firstly to 140th Field Ambulance and, the following day, October 13, to an unspecified casualty clearing station before being forwarded – on that same day - to the 15th Corps Rest Station. Apparently his complaint was of a mild nature.



When precisely he re-joined the Newfoundland Battalion from the Rest Station seems not to be recorded in his papers, but a stay in a CRS was usually not an extended one*.

**The paper in his files that records...‘With Battalion 23/1/17’...refers to something else.*

(Right below: Evacuating casualties to the rear in hand-carts after an infantry operation – somewhere on the Somme – from Illustration or Le Miroir)

The Newfoundland Battalion was not to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, it would supply 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 Brigade.

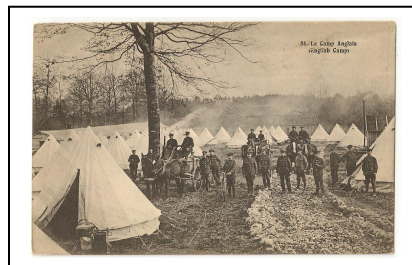


(Right above: Stretcher-bearers not only shared the dangers of the battle-field with their arms-bearing comrades, but they often spent a longer period of time exposed to those same perils. This photograph was likely taken during First Somme. – from Illustration)

On October 30, the Newfoundland unit had eventually been retired to rear positions from the Gueudecourt area. It had been serving in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day.

The Newfoundlanders were now to spend two weeks withdrawn to the area of Ville-sous-Corbie, re-enforcing and reorganizing. It was not to be until November 15 that the 1st Battalion began to wend its way back up to the front lines.

There it continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period broken only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas period, encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.

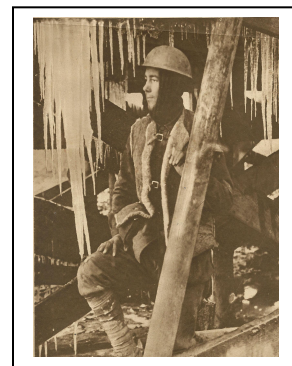


(Right: A typical British Army Camp during rather inclement winter conditions somewhere on the Continent – from a vintage post-card)

It had been on January 11 that the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered out of *Corps Reserve* and its lodgings at *Camps en Amienois* from where it would make its way on foot to the community of Airaines. From the railway station there it was to entrain for the small town of Corbie where it had thereupon taken over billets which it had already occupied for a short period only two months before.

After that recent six-week Christmas respite spent in *Corps Reserve* far to the rear, 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 fatality – of 1917.

Those casualties, however, were only some of those everyday thousands whom Douglas Haig casually referred to as *wastage* as the Newfoundland unit had not ventured from its trenches.



In fact, the sole infantry activity *directly* involving the Newfoundland unit during that entire period – from Gueudecourt in mid-October, 1916, until Monchy-le-Preux in mid-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 would bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.

(Right above: A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, their unit to be relieved by the Newfoundlanders on March 1, enjoys his cigarette in the cold and ice of the trenches at Sailly-Saillisel during the winter of 1916-1917. – from *Illustration*)

(Right: The fighting during the period 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 Sailly-Saillisel the month of March had been a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they were now to spend their time near the communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and in training for upcoming events.

They had 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: *The Prime Minister of Newfoundland visiting the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, encamped at Meaulté – from The War Illustrated*)



On March 29, the Newfoundlanders had begun to make their way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, the march to finish amid the rubble of the village of Monchy-le-Preux.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras at the time of the Great War, early in 1916 – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood atop Vimy Ridge since 1936 – photograph from 2010*)

On April 9 the British Army was to launch an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a major French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties – just over four thousand - this attack was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, its only positive episode to be the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday, 1917.



And while the British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, the French *Bataille du Chemin des Dames* had been yet a further disaster.

(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*)



The 1st Battalion was to play its part during the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at the 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*, the ineptly-planned action at Monchy-le-Preux would prove to be the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war, four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told on April 14 alone*.

**It was also an action in which a DSO, an MC and eight MMs were won by a small group of nine personnel of the Battalion – the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) awarded to the unit's Commanding officer. An MM for the same action was also presented to a private from the Essex Regiment .*

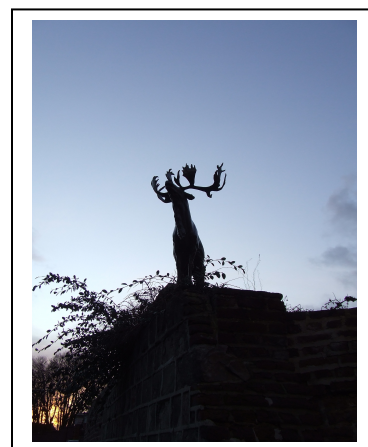
The son of Isaac Piercey and step-son of Ida Jane Piercey (née Peach) of Hopeall, Trinity Bay, he was also step-brother to Isaac Jr. and apparently to several other step-siblings: a big family...the father claims in another of his letters*.

**It would appear that Birkely Piercey was the illegitimate son of Isaac Piercey and of Jane Penney (Piercey?); Isaac Junior, born September 5, 1890, was the son of Isaac Piercey and Julia Ann (Piercey?); on November 13, 1897, Isaac Peach, cited as 'bachelor', married Ida Jane Peach with whom over the subsequent twenty years he had the following children: William-Henry, Lizzie-Melinda, Hannah, Melina, Amelia-Jane, Flora, Beatrice, Daphne and Hedley-Charles.*

Private Birkely Piercey was reported as *missing in action* on April 14, 1917, while serving with 'A' Company during the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux. He was officially *presumed dead* some thirty weeks later, on November 17, of the same year.

Birkely Piercey had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-three years: date of birth in Hopeall(?), Newfoundland, April 18, 1889 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

(Right: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands atop the vestiges of a German strong-point in the centre of the village. – photograph from 2012*)



Private Birkely Piercey was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) 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. Last updated – February 11, 2023.