



**Private George Percival Simms (Regimental Number 1217) lies in Ancre British Cemetery – Grave reference: II. F. 12.**

**His occupation previous to his military service recorded as that of a *fisherman* working for a monthly fifty dollars, George Percival Simms presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on March 6, 1915. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as being...*Fit for Foreign Service.***

Two days later, on March 8, he returned to the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, there to enlist – engaged at the private soldier’s rate of a single dollar per diem, plus a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance*.

Seventeen days again after his enlistment, on March 25, he was undertake his attestation, to swear his *Oath of Allegiance*, the concluding official formality. At that moment George Percival Simms thereupon became...*a soldier of the King*.

There now passed a lengthy period of four weeks before, on April 22, 1915, Private Simms, Number 1217, embarked in the harbour of St. John’s for...*overseas service...with the two-hundred forty-nine officers and...other ranks...of ‘E’ Company* onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Stephano* en route for Halifax.

There appear to be no details of how or where he may have spent those several intervening weeks before taking ship for...*overseas*; Private Simms may have returned home to St. Anthony on the north-east coast, or perhaps even to work – but this is mere speculation.

Two days later, on April 24 at eleven-thirty in the evening, the detachment began its trans-Atlantic passage on board the trans-Atlantic liner *SS Missanabie* from Nova Scotia to Liverpool. The vessel arrived in that English west-coast port-city on May 2 or 3 – the two dates are recorded although the second may well have been the date of disembarkation.



The Newfoundlanders on this occasion had sailed from Halifax in the company of the Canadian Army Service Corps *Railway Supply Depot*.

(Right above: *The image of ‘Stephano’ passing through the Narrows of St. John’s Harbour is shown by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right: *The image of ‘Missanabie’ is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries website. The vessel was of the Canadian Pacific Line and, although transporting troops during the Great War, did so as part of her commercial services which continued during the conflict. On September 9, 1918, she was torpedoed and sunk off the south coast of Ireland with the loss of forty-five lives.*)



From Liverpool the contingent travelled northwards by train to the Scottish capital, Edinburgh where, on May 4, ‘E’ Company joined ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ Companies which had already taken up station as the garrison at the historic Castle, the first troops from outside the British Isles ever to do so.

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



Private Simms' 'E' Company, however, was to have but a few days to savour the charms of the Scottish capital.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some seven months before that May 4, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's for the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits – these to become 'A' and 'B' Companies - during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after a recruit's enlistment and/ or attestation. To become known to history as the *First Five Hundred* and also as the *Blue Puttees*, on that day they had boarded the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting in St. John's Harbour.



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

The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.



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

Once having disembarked 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, as recorded beforehand, it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 of 1915, 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent\* - would arrive 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.

*\*This contingent, while a part of the Newfoundland Regiment, was not yet a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Seven days after the arrival of Private Simms' 'E' Company in the Scottish capital, on May 11, the entire Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the unit was dispatched 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 would eventually receive 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\*. On that date the newly-formed 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus now available to be sent on ...*active service*.

(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*)



*\*This was approximately fifteen hundred, sufficient to furnish two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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 *Camp Aldershot*. This force, now the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.



(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.*)

Meanwhile the two junior Companies, ‘E’ – as seen, the last arrived at Edinburgh - and the aforementioned ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion.

Private Simms, however, although having left Newfoundland as a soldier of ‘E’ Company, was not to be posted to the Regimental Depot but to southern England.

When he had been apprised of this change in plans seems not to be recorded – nor why he was selected - but Private Simms was one of the few from ‘E’ Company who were to swell the ranks of the units posted to *Aldershot* - thus he became a soldier of ‘B’ Company. And it was during the period while he was at *Camp Aldershot*, and as was the case with the great majority of the Newfoundland troops there, that Private Simms was prevailed upon to re-enlist...*for the duration of the war*. This he did on August 16\*.

*\*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 signed on for the ‘Duration’ at the time of their enlistment.*

(Right: 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 its departure to 'active service' on the Gallipoli Peninsula – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)



(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.)



On August 20, 1915, Private Simms and his 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport 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 was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right: *Kangaroo Beach*, where the officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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*: 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)

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



When the Newfoundlanders landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* on that September night of 1915 they were to 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 been proving to be little more than a debacle:

(continued)

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.



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



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

(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*)



\* \* \* \* \*

Five weeks less a day after having set foot on the sand and stone – mostly the latter – of *Kangaroo Beach*, on October 23 Private Simms was evacuated from the Newfoundland positions at *Suvla Bay* – possibly via the Greek island of Lemnos – on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Devona*. He had been diagnosed as suffering from dysentery.



(Right above: *The image of the SS 'Devona' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-siter. An elderly vessel constructed in 1896, there appears to be little information available about her war-time career except that she was employed per times as troop transport and also as hospital ship. She was scrapped in 1923.*)

He was admitted into St. Patrick's Military Hospital on the British-held Mediterranean island of Malta on October 30. Five weeks less a day later, on December 3, Private Simms was released from there to move to the *St. Barnabas Camp*, Ghain Tuffeiha, also on Malta, for a period of convalescence.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Disused and abandoned Royal Navy medical facilities from the era of British sovereignty today stand idle on the now-independent – since 1964 – island of Malta.* – photograph from 2011)

It was not until January 26 of the New Year, 1916, that Private Simms disembarked from His Majesty's Transport *Bornu* to report...*to duty*...in Egypt, almost certainly at the large British Sidi Bishr Base Depot in Alexandria. He was not to re-join the Newfoundland Battalion until March 1, likely having travelled the length of the *Suez Canal*, north to south, in order to do so, the unit being encamped in the vicinity of the port of Suez at the time.



(Right above: *The image of 'Bornu' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Employed at times prior to the Great War as an immigrant ship to Canada and the United States, Bornu was sold by her owner to the British Admiralty in 1915 to serve as a troop-transport. Only a year later, on October 28, the vessel foundered off the western tip of Cape Finisterre.*)

\* \* \* \* \*

If the situation had already been tenuous at the time of Private Simms' departure from *Suvla Bay* in mid-October, it was to become worse. November 26 of 1915 had seen perhaps 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.

As the following days passed, the plight of the British - and thus of the Newfoundlanders - was daily becoming more and more untenable; thus on the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the entire area of *Suvla Bay* – the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 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 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 above: *'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 evacuation of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*, the Newfoundland unit had been ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria. On January 14, the Australian Expeditionary Force Transport *Nestor* had arrived there with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on board. The vessel was to sail just after mid-day on the 16<sup>th</sup>, on its way southwards down the Suez Canal to Port Suez where she arrived on the morrow and where the Newfoundlanders landed and marched to their encampment.



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

(Right above: *The photograph 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 once again in 1940 for government service in the Second World War. In 1950 she was broken up.*)

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

And it had been, of course, at the end of those eight weeks spent by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Port Suez, that Private Simms, on March 1, had reported back to his unit.





(Preceding page: *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*)

\* \* \* \* \*

Private Simms was not to wait very long before he found himself once more afloat on the *Suez Canal* but, on this second occasion, now travelling in the opposite direction, from south to north.

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

After the two-month interval spent since mid-January in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the Newfoundland 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.



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 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: *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.*

(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 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 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.*



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

On July 1, 1916, while serving with ‘B’ Company during the fighting of the first day of...*First Somme*, Private Simms was at first reported as...*missing in action*...at Beaumont-Hamel. Six months afterwards, on December 31, he was officially ...*presumed dead*.



The son of Ezriah Simms (Azariah of St Anthony Harbour?) and of Lucy Simms (deceased of tuberculosis on January 28, 1908) of St. Anthony, he was also brother to young Herbert - to whom he had allotted a daily allowance of forty cents – to William Albert who had died at the age of nine months, and to Eliza-Caroline-Burse. Private Simms had been a member of the *Legion of Frontiersmen*.

Then, subsequent to a report of December 12, 1917 – some eighteen months after the action at Beaumont-Hamel - submitted by the Burial Officer of VI Corps, he was later confirmed as having been...*killed in action or died of wounds received in action on or shortly after 1/7/1916*.



The dossier of Private Simms was thus amended so as to read as above.

(Right: *This family memorial which commemorates Private George Percival Simms stands in the Old United Church Cemetery in the community of St. Anthony, just behind the old War Memorial.* – photograph from 2020)

George Percival Simms was a *declared* twenty years of age at the time of his enlistment. The stone in the St. Anthony United Church Cemetery – seen above - seems to cite him as being twenty-eight years old at his death. *Vital Statistics* shows twenty-one\* - the date recorded in the Newfoundland Birth Register is June 14, 1892.



**(Preceding page: *The sacrifice of Private George P. Simms is honoured on both the old and the New War Memorials – the new memorial shown here - in the community of St Anthony. – photograph from 2020*)**

***\*His signed enlistment paper - he made a mark as he was unable to write - says twenty-six years at the time; other official papers say twenty and twenty-one years.***

**Private George Percival Simms was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 19, 2023.**