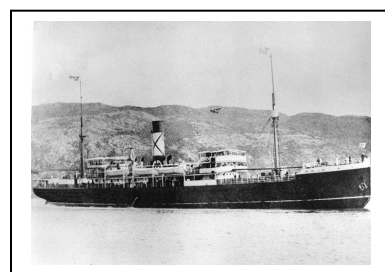




Private John Henry Simms, MM, (Regimental Number 88) lies in Dozinghem Military Cemetery – Grave reference III. I. 22.

His occupation prior to enlistment recorded as that of a *fisherman* working for an annual return of about \$500.00, John Henry Simms was a recruit of the First Draft. He presented himself for medical examination at the CLB Armoury in St. John's on August 26 of 1914 before then enlisting on September 2. Attesting a month later, on October 1, he embarked for England on October 3 onto the Bowring Brothers' ship *Florizel*.



(continued)

The vessel sailed on October 4, the following day, in order, once off the south coast of the island, to join the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas.

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

In the United Kingdom Private Simms trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England, then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness - at Edinburgh Castle – where it provided the first garrison from outside the British Isles - and later again at Stobs Camp near the town of Hawick.



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

(Right above: *The Newfoundland Regiment parades at Stobs Camp and is presented its Colours on June 10, 1915. – courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)*



At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies* 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 were sent to Scotland's west coast, to Ayr, where they were to form 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 – photograph from Bain News Services via Wikipedia)*

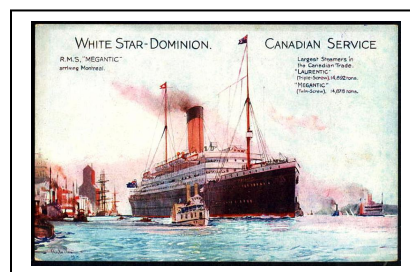
**On July 10, 1915, 'F' Company had arrived at Stobs Camp from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus permitting it to be ordered to active service. The 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.*

It is likely that it was while he was in training at Aldershot that Private Simms was prevailed upon to re-enlist*, on this occasion *for the duration of the war*, on or about August 13.

**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.*

(continued)

On August 20, 1915, Private Simms and his comrades-in-arms embarked onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks where, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, he disembarked with the 1st Battalion at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

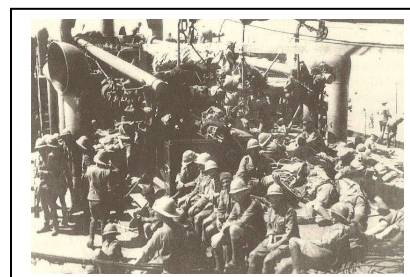


(Right above: *The image of Megantic, in peace-time a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

(Right: *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 below: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: it is either Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, the Newfoundlanders were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives)*



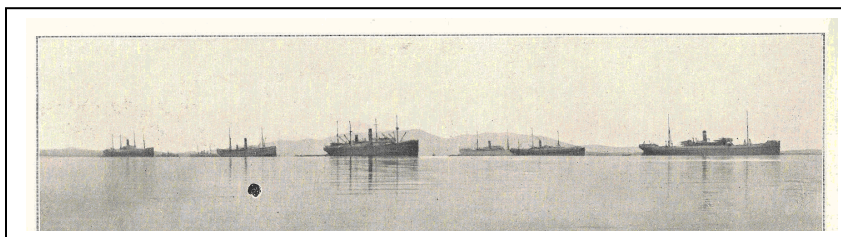
(Right below: *A century later, the area, today little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where Private Simms served in the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)*



On December 22*, Private Simms was reported as having been admitted into the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos (see immediately below) - some fifty kilometres distant from the *Gallipoli Peninsula* - for treatment for jaundice. At an unspecified later date he was released to the Lowland Casualty Clearing Station, also at Mudros.

**The British had already evacuated the last of its troops from Suvla Bay – the Newfoundlanders having formed a part of the rear-guard – on the night of December 19-20, some to the nearby island of Imbros, others to Lemnos, further away.*

(Right: *Mudros Bay, Lemnos, in late 1915 harbouring numerous and varied types of Allied – British and French – shipping – from Illustration)*



(continued)

(Right: Mudros Bay, Lemnos, shown almost a century afterwards the fighting on the Gallipoli Peninsula, and almost deserted – photograph from 2011)



Discharged to the Base Depot at Alexandria, on January 5, 1916, Private Simms was there to re-join his parent unit on January 16, the day following the 1st Battalion's return to Egypt after the British had finally abandoned the Gallipoli Campaign.

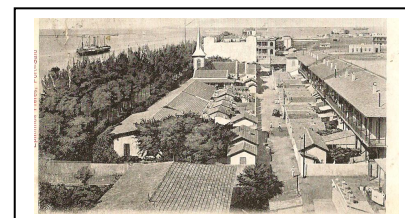
The British evacuation of the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* had taken place on the night of January 8-9 of 1916, and the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to thereupon be sent back to Egypt (as seen above) and to disembark in the port-city of Alexandria on the 15th of that month.

(Right: *The British destroy their supplies during their final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Newfoundlanders were among the last to leave, to serve on two occasions as a rear-guard**. – photograph taken from the battleship *Cornwallis* 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 boat to abandon the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

From there the Newfoundlanders were transferred, almost immediately, south to Suez where they were to await further orders. At that point it would seem that the theatre of the future posting of the Regiment's 29th Division was still unclear since Bulgaria had recently joined the Central Powers.



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

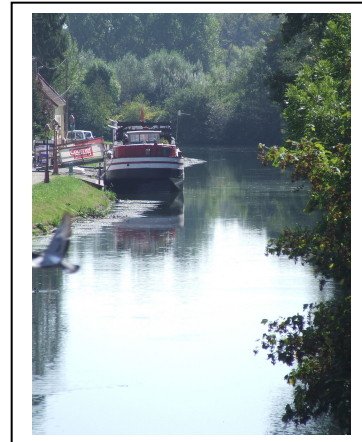
On March 14, the officers and men of the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, embarked through Port Tewfiq at the southern end of the Suez Canal onto HM Transport *Alaunia* for the voyage to the French Mediterranean port of Marseilles. Eight days later, on March 22, and in the area of the Marseilles docks, Private Simms' unit was to board a train which would transport it towards the carnage of the *Western Front*.

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



Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Battalion's train was to arrive at the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for them having travelled unused in a separate wagon.

Even after de-training at the local station at two o'clock in the morning, the Newfoundlanders still had a long march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé. It is thus doubtful if many of those tired soldiers paid much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they marched on their way from the station. Some three months later *the Somme* would become a part of their history.



On April 13, the 1st Battalion marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all eastward from Pont-Rémy. There the Newfoundlanders would be billeted, would receive re-enforcements and then, in two days' time, would be introduced to the trenches of the *Western Front*.

(Right above: *The Somme seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)

The Newfoundlanders would also soon be preparing for the British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for that meandering river, *the Somme*.

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

Private Simms is documented officially as being *with Battalion* on July 4, 1916, a report which confusingly gives the impression that he – and many others reported thus – were not serving on July 1, the first day of *the Somme*, or on the succeeding days. This is far from so: the documental evidence is that Private Simms was serving either with another unit (see below), or as a stretcher-bearer, or as one of the ten per cent reserve of fourteen officers and eighty-three *other ranks* held back in Louvencourt on that date. This contingent was called to the field only late in the day when the fighting was all but done – but which was to incur casualties nonetheless.



(Right above: *A part of the re-constituted battle-field in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?)*)

His personal files document that Private Simms was to be seconded from the 1st Battalion - perhaps at some time prior to July 4 (and thus prior to July 1), although the records are not clear - to serve with the Divisional Train – not a railway train but various forms of transport, drawn mostly by horses and mules, which brought supplies from ports and rail-heads to large dumps behind the lines.

Apparently he was to remain attached to that unit until the following spring when he reported back *to duty* with the Newfoundland Battalion at Meaulté on March 26 of 1917 (see further below). However, what Private Simms' duties might have been during this period of secondment seems not to be recorded.

* * * * *

During the period of Private Simms' absence from among its ranks, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had kept its rendezvous with destiny.

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.*

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



(Right above: *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: *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.



Such had then been the dire condition of the attacking forces after the slaughter of July 1 that it was feared a German counter-assault might well annihilate what had survived of the British Expeditionary Force on *the Somme*. The remnants had thus remained in the trenches, at night searching for the wounded and burying the dead. It was to be July 6 before the Newfoundlanders were to be ordered back to Englebelmer and a further two before the unit had marched to Mailly-Maillet.



(Preceding page: *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 re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported *to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the disaster at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power having arrived, 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 that morning of July 1, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

On July 27-28 of 1916, the 1st Battalion - still under 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. 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*.



**At the same time the Canadians, some of whom had been serving in Belgium for as long as eighteen months, were being withdrawn to train before then to serve at ‘the Somme’.*

(Right above: *The entrance to Private Simms’ ‘A’ Company’s quarters – obviously renovated since that time - in the ramparts of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *the city of Ypres towards the end of 1915 – and eight months before the Newfoundlanders were posted there for the first time – from a vintage post-card*)

The Salient – it was to exist for some four years, almost the entire conflict – had proved to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders’ posting there; yet they had nonetheless incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal. Then on October 8, after having served there for some ten weeks, the 1st Battalion had been ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.

Four days later, on October 12, the Newfoundlanders were to pass to the attack on the outskirts of Gueudecourt – a dozen or so kilometres removed from - and to the south-east of - Beaumont-Hamel. One of the many small farming villages of the area, by that October it had been reduced to little more than an uninhabited heap of rubble. The attack of that day was to be a second ill-planned advance and the Newfoundlanders had once again lost very heavily – two-hundred thirty-nine casualties, all ranks - and achieved very little.

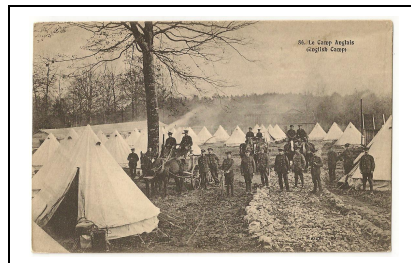


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(Preceding page: *The fields at Gueudecourt across which the Battalion advanced towards the trees on the right horizon: A Caribou stands there today. - photograph from 2009.*)

After Gueudecourt, the 1st Battalion had 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 six weeks spent in *corps reserve* during the Christmas period.

(Right: *A British encampment somewhere on the Continent in wintry weather – from a vintage post-card*)

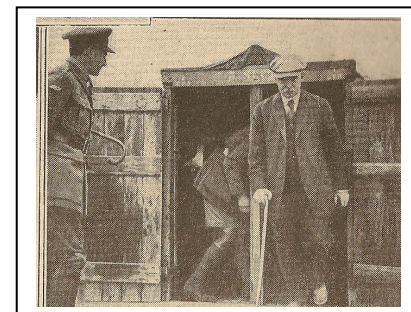


The Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to *active service* on January 23, although they had been back in the trenches already by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality - of the New Year. The only concerted infantry activity to involve the 1st Battalion during that entire period – from Gueudecourt in mid-October of 1916, until April of 1917 – was to be the sharp engagement at Sailly-Saillisel of several days' duration at the end of February and beginning of March. The action would bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.



(Right above: *The fighting during the time of the Battalion's posting to Sailly-Saillisel took place on the far side of the village, now reconstructed, which was no more than a heap of rubble at the time. - photograph from 2009(?)*)

After Sailly-Saillisel the month of March was to be a quiet time for the Battalion; having departed from the trenches, they now would spend their time near the communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois, re-enforcing, re-organizing, and training for upcoming events. They 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 having presented himself on March 17, St. Patrick's Day.



(Right above: *Sir Edward Morris here pictured during his visit of the Newfoundland Contingent at the camp at Meaulté on St. Patrick's Day – from *The War Illustrated**)

* * * * *

On March 26, Private Simms' personal file documents him as having on that day re-joined the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, from the Divisional Train. The Regimental War Diary entry of the day – a miserable one as far as the weather was concerned - has the Newfoundlanders behind the lines training for *open warfare* – not something they would be able to put into practice for a further eighteen months.

On March 29, the 1st Battalion began to make its way – on foot – from Camps-en-Amienois to the north-east, towards the venerable medieval city of Arras and eventually beyond, a march that was to terminate amid the vestiges of the village of Monchy-le-Preux.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place in Arras as it was already by the spring of 1916, less than two years after the onset of the Great War: The first bombardments had begun in October of 1914. – from Illustration*)



On April 9, 1917, the British launched 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 French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties it would be the most expensive operation of the entire *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.



While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* would be yet a further disaster.

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

The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment played its part in the *Battle of Arras*, a role that would begin at a place called Monchy-le-Preux on April 14 and which would finish ten days later, on April 23, perhaps a single kilometre distant, at *Les Fosses Farm*. After *Beaumont-Hamel*, Monchy-le-Preux was to prove the most costly day of the Newfoundlanders' war – four-hundred eighty-seven casualties all told. It must be assumed, there being no evidence to the contrary, that on this occasion Private Simms was present, playing his unsung role.



(Right above: *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*)



(Right: *Newfoundland troops just after the time of Monchy-le-Preux. – from The War Illustrated*)

May of 1917 was a period when the Newfoundlanders were to be moving hither and thither on the *Arras Front*, marching in and out of the trenches. While there was to be the ever-present artillery-fire, there was little infantry activity – apart from the marching. At the outset of June, the 1st Battalion retired from the line to *Bonneville*, there to spend its time re-enforcing, re-organizing and training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it transpired, the autumn as well.



(continued)

(Preceding page: Newfoundland troops on the march in the community of Berneville – not Bonneville - in early May (the 7th?) of 1917 – from *The War Illustrated*)

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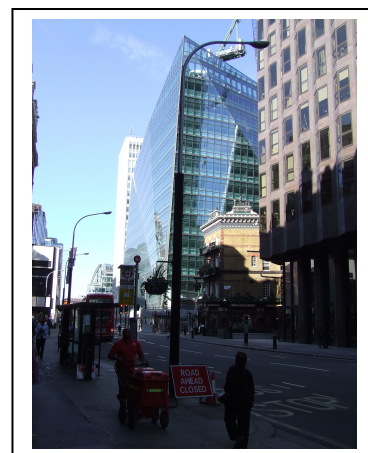
During this period, Private Simms had been awarded a period of leave which appears to have been extended due to a bout of sickness. The details are sparse but seem to amount to the following:

On the night of April 23-24, following the fighting of April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux, and after the confrontation of the 23rd at *Les Fosses Farm*, the once-again depleted Newfoundland Battalion had received the order to retire to the city of Arras, thence to billets in the community of Simencourt.

Whether or not Private Simms had served in the area of Monchy-le-Preux until April 24 has not been documented, but that was apparently the date on which he commenced...*a short leave from France*. It was to be a ten-day furlough, his orders having been to return to the Continent on May 3.

From the scanty information available it appears that in the United Kingdom he may well have been a guest of Lieutenant Hector McNeill of the 1st Battalion, *he* recently promoted from the ranks. However, it also appears that Private Simms was to fall ill and was to remain for at least until the month of June receiving treatment. A small amount of correspondence in the form of telegrams appear to show that during the first week of June he was in Edinburgh.

Apparently the Regimental Office in London had been apprised of his whereabouts, and on June 3 sent a telegram to his physician, a Doctor James Murray, that either Private Simms...*if sufficiently recovered...be sent to report to the Office at 58, Victoria Street, London, or if not, that he be sent...to the nearest military hospital.*



(Right above: *The remnants of Number 58 are to be found beneath the glass monstrosity in the picture. The only survivor of that period is Number 52, the much smaller brick building, which today is – and perhaps also was in those days – a public-house – a pub! - photograph from 2012)*

The return telegram from Doctor Murray stated simply that...*Suffering from acute gastritis unable to travel tonight.*

From Private Simms' papers we have not been given to know when he eventually was able to travel; three re-enforcement drafts arrived to report to the 1st Battalion during the remainder of that month of June, 1917, but the identities of the new personnel have not been recorded.

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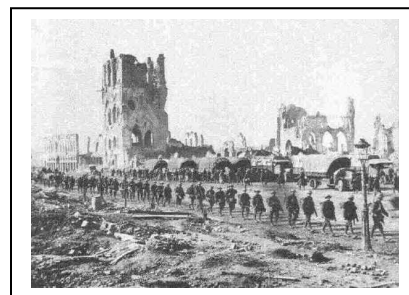
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The Newfoundlanders once again moved north into Belgium – at the end of June - and once again to the area of Ypres, at the outset to serve in the area to the north where the *Yser Canal* begins to exit the city from south to north.



(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, manned its eastern bank: East is to the right – photograph from 2014*)

The area to the east of Ypres had long before – even prior to the *Battle of Arras* (see above) - been selected by the British High Command to become the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history as simply *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – at least *ostensibly* - one of the British Army’s main objectives.



(Right above: *Troops file through the rubble, and past the historic Cloth Hall, of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front during the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

The 1st Battalion was to remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army which floundered its way across the sodden countryside of Flanders. Notably Private Simms’ unit fought in two major engagements, at the *Steenbeek* on August 16, and at the *Broembeek* on October 9.



Private Simms was to play his role at the former affair: he was not to do so at the latter.

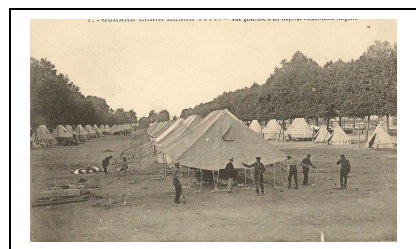
(Right above: *Somewhere – perhaps anywhere or everywhere – on the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

Private Simms was to be a recipient of the Military Medal ...‘for bravery in the field. In the attack on the enemy near Langemarck on 16th August, 1917, whilst in command of a Lewis Gun Section, he showed great initiative and leadership in getting his men across a particularly bad piece of ground. He rescued one man under heavy shell fire who had sunk almost to his shoulders in mud. On reaching one objective he rushed forward in spite of a heavy barrage and located an excellent position for his Lewis gun, from which good results were obtained - London Gazette, October 8, 1917



While serving with ‘A’ Company, Private Simms was wounded in both the right leg and in the head on that August 16, 1917, during the fighting at the *Steenbeek*, Belgium. He was thereupon evacuated to the 4th Casualty Clearing Station in the vicinity of the northern French community of Lozinghem.

(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



The son of William Henry, fisherman and planter, and of Emily Simms (née Gillett) of Fogo – the couple married on October 24, 1881 – he was also brother to Saul, George-Adey, David, Alexander and to Elizabeth-Jane.



Private Simms was reported as having *died of wounds* on the following day, August 17, 1917, by the Commanding Officer of the same 4th CCS. At home it was the Reverend J. O. Britnell who was requested to inform his family*.

*At some time after his death, a Miss Kate M. Marchbank of Hawick wrote to the London Office of the Regiment requesting news of Private Simms. She was apprised of his passing.



(The above photograph of Private Simms is from the Provincial Archives.)

John Henry Simms had enlisted at twenty-two years of age, his birth-date not to be found by the author.

(Right above: This is the area of the Steenbeek, close to the trees, and also close to where the 1st Battalion fought the engagement of August 16, 1917. It is perhaps eight kilometres distant from the village called Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010)



(Right and far right: The sacrifice of Private Simms is honoured in St. Andrew's Church as well as on the nearby War Memorial. – photographs from 2013)

Private John Henry Simms, MM, 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).



(continued)

Stogo July 14 1918

Dear Sir just a few words
of thanks to you for
the trouble and sympathy
you have taken with
regard to my Dear Sons
passions it is very sad to
know that the bright young
man he was will never return
but gods will must be done
so we must leave it all
in his care and his way is
always the best from
your humble servant
William H Simms

Above is a letter written by William Henry Simms, father of Private John Henry Simms, possibly to the Minister of Militia for the Dominion of Newfoundland, John Robert Bennett (later *Sir John Robert Bennett*).

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 13, 2023.