



Private William Skeans (elsewhere Skanes) (Regimental Number 1176) lies in Kilbride (Newfoundland) Cemetery in the older (B) section.

His occupation prior to the time of his enlistment recorded as that of a *chauffeur – motorman* with the *Reid Newfoundland Company* – and working for a monthly forty dollars, William Skeans presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury in St. John’s, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on February 19 of the year 1915. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.**

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

It was to be on the third day following that medical assessment, February 22, that William Skeans returned to the same venue, the *CLB Armoury*, to enlist. He was thereupon engaged for a year at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar to which would be added a daily ten-cent *Field Allowance*.

A further seven days were now to follow before there then came to pass, once again at the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the first day of that month of March he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, William Skeans became...*a soldier of the King*.

Following his enlistment it is likely that Private Skeans reported...*to duty...to be quartered in the temporary barracks* apparently established since 1915 in the St. John's curling rink and the *Prince's Skating Rink* in the eastern end of the city*.



(Right above: *This photograph of the Prince's Rink in St. John's with military personnel, apparently attired in uniforms of Great War vintage, on parade is from the 'Ice Hockey Wiki' web-site.*)

**However, the author has been unable to discover exact the date on which the Newfoundland Regiment commenced using these premises.*

For Private Skeans, Number 1176, there was yet to be another, but final, waiting period of three weeks less two days before he would be summoned to...*overseas service*. How he occupied himself during that time is not recorded among his papers although there was to be a somewhat low-level of ongoing military training; and he may, of course, have spent time with his uncle in the city and nearby Kilbride - but this is only speculation.



(Right above: *The image of the Bowring Brothers' vessel 'Stephano', sister-ship of 'Florizel', as she passes through 'the Narrows' of St. John's Harbour is from the Provincial Archives.*)

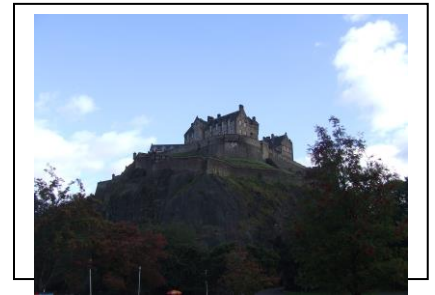
Unlike the two previous contingents to have departed Newfoundland (see below) for...*overseas service*, Private Skeans' 'D' Company was not to sail directly to the United Kingdom. On March 20 he, a soldier of the Number 8 Platoon, embarked onto the Bowring-Brothers' vessel *Stephano* for the short voyage to Halifax, capital city of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, where it was thereupon to board a second vessel, the newly-launched *Orduña* for the trans-Atlantic crossing.

(Right below: *The image of Orduña is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. The vessel was not to be requisitioned at any time during the Great War but would be used by the Cunard Company to continue operations on its commercial service between Liverpool and New York. It would, however, as during this month of March, carry military personnel as paying passengers if the occasion presented itself.*)

Having then sailed from Nova Scotia on March 22 for Liverpool, Private Skeans and his draft landed there eight days later, on the 30th. Once disembarked in Liverpool, the two-hundred fifty men and officers of 'D' Company were thereupon transported on the same date by train to Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, to join the Newfoundland Regiment's 'A', 'B' and 'C' Companies.



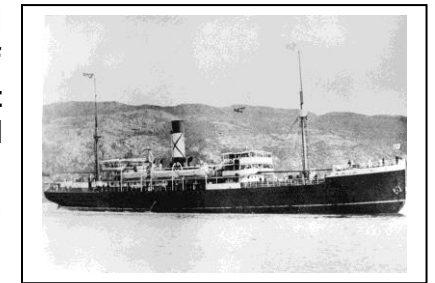
These units were by this time stationed at the historic Castle, 'A' and 'B' having recently been posted from Fort George and 'C' having arrived directly from home (see further below). After 'D' Company's arrival at the end of that month of March, the Newfoundlanders were now to remain at Edinburgh for the following six weeks.



(Right above: *From its vantage point on Castle Hill, the venerable fortress overlooks the city of Edinburgh where in 1915 the Newfoundlanders were to provide the first garrison to be drawn from outside the British Isles. – photograph from 2011*)

* * * * *

Five to six months before that time, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 there had been a period of training of some 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 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.

(Preceding page: *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, 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 ‘C’ Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent* - would arrive directly from Newfoundland.

**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.*

* * * * *

As seen in a previous paragraph, for the month of April and the first days of May of 1915, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ Companies, now united, were to furnish the garrison – the first troops from outside the British Isles to do so - of the guardian of Scotland’s capital city. Then, during the first week of May, ‘E’ Company was to report there... *to duty*...from home. Four days later again, on May 11, the Newfoundland contingent was ordered elsewhere.

On that day, three weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland 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*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus rendered available to be sent on ‘*active service*’.



(Right above: *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 four ‘fighting’ companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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



(continued)

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. This force, now 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, 'E' – 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 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.



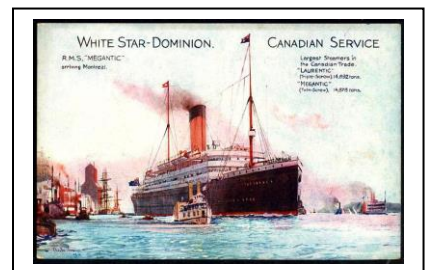
(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – the photograph is from *Bain News Services* via the *Wikipedia* web-site.)

It was while the Newfoundland Battalion was in training during those weeks at Aldershot, on August 15 that Private Skeans would be prevailed upon to enlist for the duration of the conflict.

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



(Right above: *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.)



(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 Skeans and his Newfoundland unit 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 1st Battalion was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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)*



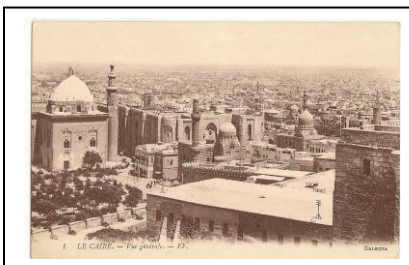
(Right adjacent: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: either Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives)*



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

* * * * *

The majority of the personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to serve on the *Gallipoli Peninsula* where, as recorded above, they landed on the night of September 19-20. However, Private Skeans was not to be found among those ranks. He and several others of the Newfoundland unit, having left Cairo, had been ordered to remain behind at the British base in the port-city of Alexandria.



(Right above: *The Egyptian capital, Cairo, just prior to the war – from a vintage post-card)*

Those held back in Alexandria, mostly attached to the Transport Section, were needed for service elsewhere than in *Gallipoli*. The *Senussi*, a religious leader, had been fomenting rebellion on the frontier region of Egypt and Libya and the British had been obliged to form three composite battalions to combat the problem. Thus Private Skeans was to find himself serving *in the field* as a soldier of the *Western Frontier Force* from December of 1915 to February of the following year, 1916.



On March 2, Private Skeans departed Egypt, sailing from Port Saïd at the northern end of the *Suez Canal*, on his way to France. He disembarked in the French Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles some eight days later, on March 10. He was thereupon despatched to the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot in the vicinity of Rouen on the Atlantic coast to await the arrival of the remainder of the 1st Battalion, as at the time it was still in Egypt awaiting orders and an eventual transfer to the *Western Front*.

(Preceding page: *Port Saïd at or about the time of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

On April 15, a detachment from Rouen of two-hundred eleven *other ranks* – accompanied by two officers – reported...*to duty...*with the Newfoundland Battalion, it already billeted in the village of Englebelmer some three kilometres behind the lines of the *Western Front*. Private Skeans is documented as being among that number, a contingent which included not only personnel from Ayr, but others from the Middle East whose departure from there had been delayed.

Only two days prior to this, on April 13 the 1st Battalion had *itself* marched into the same village of Englebelmer – thus completing a month-long transfer from Egypt – where it was billeted, welcomed those re-enforcements of the 15th from Rouen and, on that same day, was sent – along with the new-comers - to work in the communication trenches not so very far away.

* * * * *

Those several months before this time, when the Newfoundlanders had landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* on that September night of 1915 they were to disembark into a campaign that had already been 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 affair at *Suvla Bay*, had been proving to be little more than a debacle:

Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and of course the casualties inflicted by an enemy who was to fight a great deal better than the British High Command* had ever anticipated – were eventually to overwhelm the British-led forces and those of their allies, the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.



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

(Right: *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.*



During the days and then weeks which were to follow, the Newfoundland Battalion had continued to serve in the cauldron – the area was ringed by hills and Turkish artillery – that *Suvla Bay* had by then become...And the situation was to worsen.

(continued)

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



November 26 of 1915 would see 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 had been 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.

During the days that followed, the British positions at *Suvla Bay* were to become yet more and more untenable and thus on the night of December 19-20, the area had been abandoned – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.



(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)

Some of the Battalion personnel were to be 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 Newfoundland Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



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

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

This final operation took place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the British rear-guard on this second occasion also.

(continued)

**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 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 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 would then on the morrow be 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 was 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)

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

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



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

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

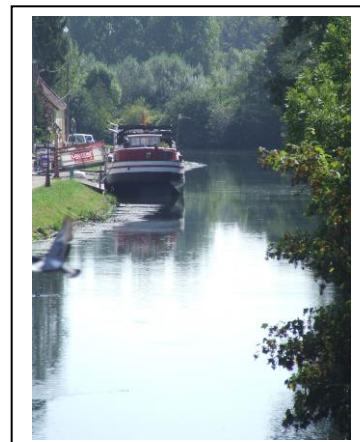


Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably 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 then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to have 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 1st Battalion 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*.

And as seen in an earlier paragraph, one of those to make his way into the above-mentioned trenches, had been Private Skeans who, having arrived from Rouen only two days before, had re-joined the Newfoundland Battalion.

* * * * *

Just days later again, 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 then 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: *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.



(continued)

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*.

(Preceding page: *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.*



(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention* – from *Le Miroir*)

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*.



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

It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the carnage 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.*

(continued)

Private Skeans was present during the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, the first day of *First Battle of the Somme*, and was one of the very few to retire from the field unscathed. On the morrow morn he was one of the sixty-eight – of some eight hundred - to report for muster.

However, it was not until July 4 that certain nominal rolls and reports became officially recorded, which explains why various personnel – including Private Skeans - who played differing roles on July 1, 1916, have not been reported as serving with the Battalion until 4/7/1916, three days later.

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 any German counter-assault might well annihilate the shattered survivors 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.



There were then a further two days before the unit had marched further again to the rear area and to billets in the village of Mailly-Maillet.

(Right above: *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 at Mailly-Maillet on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported...*to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the events at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power, the Regimental War Diary records that on the 14th of July, 1916, the 1st Battalion was still to number only... *11 officers and 260 rifles*...after the holocaust of Beaumont-Hamel, just one-quarter of establishment battalion strength.

Of course, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had not been the only unit in the British Army to have incurred horrific losses on July 1, 1916, even though it had indeed been one of the most devastated. But even with its depleted numbers, the Battalion was needed and, after that first re-enforcement, it had almost immediately again been ordered to man the trenches of the front line: as of that July 14, undermanned as seen above, the Newfoundlanders began another tour in the trenches where...*we were shelled heavily by enemy's 5.9 howitzers and a good deal of damage was done to the trenches* (excerpt from the 1st Battalion War Diary).

(continued)

A second re-enforcement draft from Rouen had then arrived days later, on July 21, while the Newfoundland Battalion was at Acheux and then, only three days afterwards – at the very time day that the Prime Minister of Newfoundland had visited the unit – a third draft of sixty other ranks had arrived in Beauval and reported...*to duty.*

(Right adjacent: *The entrance to ‘A’ Company’s quarters – obviously renovated since that time – sunk in the ramparts of the city of Ypres, when the Newfoundland Battalion was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



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



On July 27-28 of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong – maybe even fewer - even after still further re-enforcement – would move north and enter the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

(Right: *Canadian trenches in Sanctuary Wood, not far removed from the Newfoundland Battalion’s positions during August and September of 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



The unit had been ordered to the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate on the entire *Western Front*, there to continue to re-enforce and to re-organize after the ordeal of Beaumont-Hamel.

The Salient – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders’ posting there; yet they nonetheless would incur casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.



And it was to be there in *the Salient* in the sector of a place called *Railway Wood*, that the Newfoundland Battalion would soon be serving after its transfer from France.

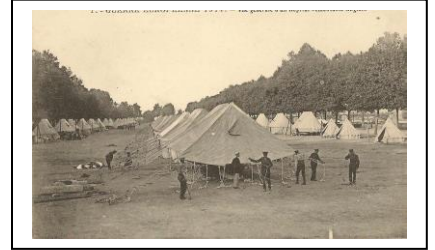
(Right above: *Railway Wood, the Newfoundland positions at the time, almost a century later – a monument to the twelve Royal Engineers buried alive there may just be perceived on the periphery of the trees – photograph from 2014*)



(Right above: *The already-battered city of Ypres seen here towards the end of the year 1915 – and some eight months before the Newfoundlanders were to be posted there for the first time – from a vintage post-card*)

* * * * *

It was on September 2 that Private Skeans accidentally incurred injuries to a hand and fingers...*while moving a waggon*. Evacuated to the 88th Field Ambulance for preliminary treatment, he was almost immediately then forwarded on to the 10th Casualty Clearing Station at the Rémy Siding, to the south-west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe.



(Right above: A *British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card*)

Two days later, on September 4, he was to pass through the 8th General Hospital in Wimereux where the injury to his finger was described as ‘trivial’ before then boarding His Majesty’s Hospital Ship *St. Andrew* for the short cross-Channel passage back to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *The image of the hospital ship ‘St. Andrew’ clad in her war-time garb is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Built for the Great Western Railway to serve as a ferry between Wales and Ireland, she was one of the first ships to be requisitioned at the outbreak of the Great War. Converted for use as a hospital ship, she was able to accommodate one-hundred ninety-four sick and wounded. The vessel was to serve from August 19 of 1914 until May 29 of 1919 when she was returned to her owners to resume her commercial routes until retired from service in 1932.*)

Upon his arrival in England, Private Skeans was admitted for further medical attention into the 3rd London General Hospital in the Borough of Wandsworth. There he remained until on or about October 2.



(Right: *The main building of what was to become the 3rd London General Hospital during the Great War had originally been opened, on July 1st of 1859, as a home for the orphaned daughters of British soldiers, sailors and marines. – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *A party of Newfoundland patients, dressed in hospital uniform but otherwise unfortunately unidentified, is seen here convalescing in the grounds of the 3rd London General Hospital at Wandsworth – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



Being then released from hospital, Private Skeans was granted the customary ten-day furlough accorded military personnel upon discharge from medical care in the United Kingdom. On or about October 11, he reported...*to duty...to the Regimental Depot*.

* * * * *

The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland to serve as the base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment. It was from there – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the newcomers from home were to be despatched in drafts, at first to the *Gallipoli Peninsula* and subsequently to the *Western Front*, to bolster the fighting companies of the Newfoundland unit.

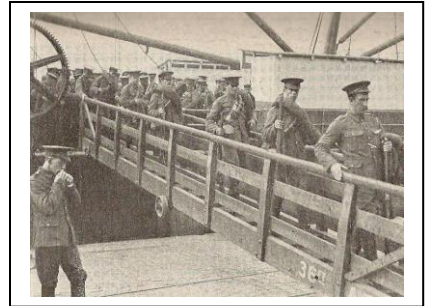


(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

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



Some seventeen weeks later, on February 1, 1917, the 17th Reinforcement Draft – Private Skeans among its ranks - passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on its way to France. On the following day, the 2nd, it disembarked in the Norman capital, Rouen, where time was spent at the large British Expeditionary Force Base Depot, to be organized and to undergo final training* before moving onward to its eventual rendezvous with 1st Battalion.



(Right above: *British troops disembark at Rouen during an earlier period of the Great War on their way to the Western Front. – from Illustration*)

**Apparently, the standard length of time for this final training at the outset of the war had been ten days – although this was to become more and more flexible as the War progressed - in areas n of 1917ear Rouen, Étapes, LeHavre and Harfleur that became known notoriously to the troops as the Bull Rings.*

On February 17 the 1st Battalion was encamped near the village of Coisy, at the end of a two-week period behind the front lines. It was here on that date that a detachment of fifty-one *other ranks*, chiefly returning wounded – Private Skeans one of its number – reported from Rouen back...*to duty...with the Newfoundland unit..*

* * * * *

By the time of Private Skeans' return, the Newfoundlanders had also returned to...active service...having enjoyed a six-week Christmas respite spent far to the rear to the south-west of the city of Amiens. The official date January 23, they apparently had returned to the trenches by then and already incurred their first casualties – and fatalities – of 1917.

And it had been by then the beginning of the winter period. As had been and was to be the case of all the winter periods of the *Great War* – that of 1916-1917 would be a time of relative calm, although cold and uncomfortable – there was to be a shortage of fuel and many other things - for most of the combatants of both sides.

It would also be a time of sickness, and the medical facilities were to be kept busy, particularly, so it seems – according to at least Canadian medical documentation - with thousands of cases of dental work.

This period had also provided the opportunity to undergo training and familiarization with the new practices and the recent weaponry of war; in the case of the Newfoundland Battalion these exercises had been at least partially undertaken from February 4 to 18 in the vicinity of the communities of Carnoy and Coisy.

On February 18, on the day after Private Skeans' return to service with his unit, the 1st Battalion would begin a five-day trek back from there to the forward area where it was to go back into the firing-line on February 23 to relieve a unit of the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers.

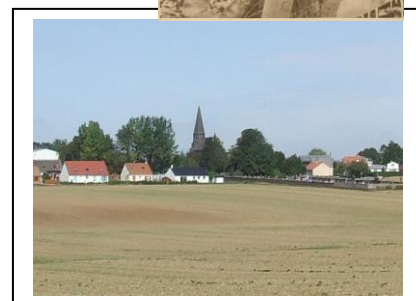
(Right: *A soldier of the Lancashire Fusiliers, his unit to be relieved by the Newfoundlanders on March 1, enjoys his cigarette in the cold of the trenches at Sully-Saillisel during the winter of 1916-1917. – from Illustration*)



It was at a place called Sully-Saillisel and the reception offered by the Germans would be both lively – and deadly: after only two days the Battalion had incurred four dead, nine wounded and three gassed without there having been any infantry action. The Newfoundlanders were withdrawn on February 25...to return three days later.

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

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



The aforesaid planned raid of the German positions at Sully-Saillisel was to go ahead a little later than scheduled as it appears that the enemy had also made similar plans. The reciprocal infantry action(s) thus continued for the better part of two days, March 2 and 3.

In fact, that sharp engagement at Sully-Saillisel was to be the sole infantry activity *directly* involving the Newfoundland unit during the entire period from Gueudecourt in mid-October, 1916, until Monchy-le-Preux in mid-April of 1917. The action would also serve to bring this episode in the Newfoundlanders' War – in the area of *the Somme* - to a close.

(continued)

After the confrontation at Sailly-Saillisel, the Newfoundland Battalion was ordered retired to the rear by train, to an encampment at Meaulté. There, and later at *Camps-en-Amienois* – even further behind the lines and where the unit had spent the preceding Christmas period – the 1st Battalion would spend almost the entire remainder of the month.

After Sailly-Saillisel that month of March would be a quiet time for the Newfoundlanders; having departed from the trenches, they were now to spend their time near those communities of Meaulté and Camps-en-Amienois re-enforcing, re-organizing, and in training for upcoming events.

They even had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band come from Ayr, 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 commenced making 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, in early 1916 – from Illustration*)



On April 9 the British Army 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 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.



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

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

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*.

(Right: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen in 1917, from the western, British, side of the community: The Newfoundlanders advanced, out of the ruins of the place, towards the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013)*

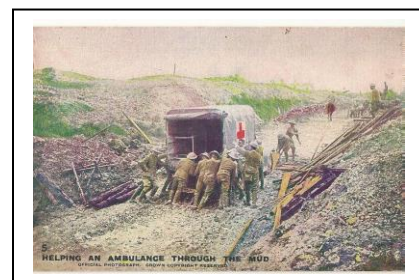


(Right: *The Caribou at Monchy-le-Preux stands atop the vestiges of a German strongpoint in the centre of the re-constructed community. – photograph from 2009(?)*



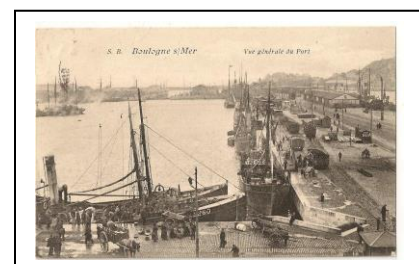
On the day of the attack of April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux Private Skeans was wounded, on this occasion occurring injuries to the right knee and left ankle. In fact, according to his hospital record, the right patella had been completely shattered. By the following day he was receiving attention in the 19th Casualty Clearing Station in Beauval.

(Right below: *Transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card)*



Only a single day later, Private Skeans was again to be transferred, from Beauval to the coastal town of Boulogne where he entered the 3rd Canadian General Hospital to remain there for six days until the 22nd when he was placed on board the Hospital ship *Princess Elisabeth* for the return journey to England where he was once more hospitalized, on April 23, in Wandsworth, in the 3rd London General Hospital.

(Right: *An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)*



(Right: *The image of the ‘Princess Elisabeth’ is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Owned by the Belgian government she was built in 1905 for use as a cross-Channel ferry. In 1915 she was hired to the British to serve as a hospital ship to accommodate some three-hundred sick and wounded and did so from 1916 to 1919 when she was returned to her former owners.*)



Some two months later, on June 25 he was released from Wandsworth, thereupon once again to be granted the usual ten-day furlough before reporting to Command Depot on July 4. It was then not to be until October 7 that he was posted back to Ayr, reporting there to ‘H’ Company and to be quartered in the *Newton Park School*.

(continued)

**After a summer spent in the vicinity of Barry, a community not distant from the city of Dundee, and where the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment temporarily had its quarters for some three months, the opposition to the move had been such that the Newfoundlanders had been back in their quarters at Ayr back at Ayr by the third week of September.*

The Army eventually had its way: four months later, in January of 1918 the Regimental Depot and the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion had been ordered south to Hazely Down Camp in the county of Hampshire. There the Headquarters were to remain for not only the remainder of the Great War, but until all the military personnel had been repatriated.

The next report of Private Skeans is that of his admission into *Heathfield Hospital, Ayr*, on November 17 before his subsequent transfer to *Ayr Military Hospital* on December 16 of that same 1917. Why he was admitted is not to be found among his papers and of this period there are apparently no further particulars available except to say that he was discharged from there on February 22-23 of 1918 (see immediately below).

An excerpt from his medical file reads as follows: *Till October 1917 he always had good health. He was never in hospital save when he was wounded. The first thing he noticed was spitting of blood. He was sent to Ayr Military Hospital (on December 16) to be treated for this & there it was discovered that he had tubercle (sic) and he was transferred to Heathfield on 23/2/18.*

The report went on to say that his condition was... *attributable to service during the present war*, and furthermore recommended... *discharge as permanently unfit for military service of any kind*, with sanatorium treatment to follow. For the time being, Private Skeans remained at *Heathfield Hospital* while the authorities arranged for his repatriation.

Private Skeans boarded ship on May 13 - likely *Mauretania* which sailed from Liverpool on the morrow – and he arrived in Halifax – if on *Mauretania*, on the 20th – from where he travelled to Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's on May 24.



(Right: *The photograph of Mauritanian seen here clad in her war-time 'dazzle camouflage' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Once he was back home, it was not long before the medical authorities acted on his behalf, and on May 31, it was recommended that he enter the *Jensen Camp* on Blackmarsh Road which had been opened to receive tubercular patients.

That advice acted upon and he entered to begin treatment on June 4, 1918: some ten months later, on February 20, 1919, a second Medical Board...*Recommended Discharge from the Army as Permanently Unfit. Remain in Jensen Camp.*

Private Skeans was definitively discharged from the Army on March 13, 1919, but apparently was to remain at the *Jensen Camp*.

(continued)

The son of John Skeans and of Jane Skeans*, of Kilbride in the District of St. John's West, and nephew of Edward Skeans, Boat House Lane, St. John's then later Kilbride, his own address was given as 10, York Street, in the city. He had allocated a daily sixty cents from his pay to the Reverend Father Nangle, described as *friend*, of the Roman Catholic Cathedral Parish, St. John's – it was cancelled in November of 1917.

William Skeans was reported of having...*died of sickness...of tuberculosis...on February 20, 1920, in the Jensen Camp.*

**His parents' names are found on a single form for a pension that Private Skeans signed; they seem to appear nowhere else in his files or on any parish or official documents. Other sources cite Edward as his father but according to the enlistment papers, Edward Skeans was his uncle.*

William Skeans had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-eight years but *Vital Statistics* has him passing away aged thirty. Thus far the exact date of his birth had proved to be elusive.

Private William Skeans was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



October 23 23

**Edward Skeans Esq
Kilbride, St. John's W. Re #1176 Pte. Wm. Skeans (dec.)**

Dear Sir,

We are forwarding by registered mail a parcel of bulbs for planting in the grave of your late nephew, the above named soldier.

In the course of time the grave will be sodded over, with the exception of a strip one foot wide, in front of the headstone, where the bulbs are to be planted. Further instructions are included in the address envelope attached to the parcel.

Your kind attention to this matter will oblige,

**Very truly yours,
Lieut xxx*
O, i/c Records**

***unsigned since this was a copy**

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 – January 30, 2023.