



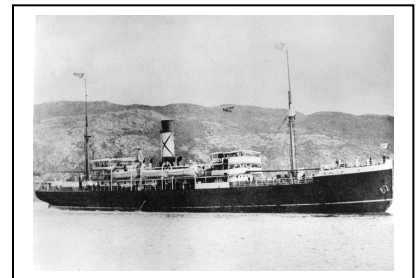
Private George Joseph Sparkes (Regimental Number 253), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



His occupations prior to enlistment being recorded as those of both *miner* and *machinist's assistant* and earning forty dollars a month with the *Dominion Iron and Steel Company* on Bell Island, George Joseph Sparkes presented himself there for medical examination on August 28, 1914, four weeks less four days after the *Declaration of War*. It was a procedure which pronounced him...*fit for Overseas Service*.

During the next few days George Joseph Sparkes made the short journey to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, where he was now to enlist at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of \$1.10 (this included a ten-cent Field Allowance) - on September 2. He was a recruit of the First Draft.

Following a four-week wait – although training was to be ongoing – Private Sparkes was to attest on October 2 and then, on the following day, was to embark on October 3 with the others of the *First Five Hundred* onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting the contingent in St. John's Harbour.



The ship sailed on the morrow to its rendezvous off the south coast of the Island where she was to join the convoy transporting the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division across the Atlantic.

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

In the United Kingdom Private Sparkes 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 the tented *Stobs Camp* near the town of Hawick to the south-east of Edinburgh.

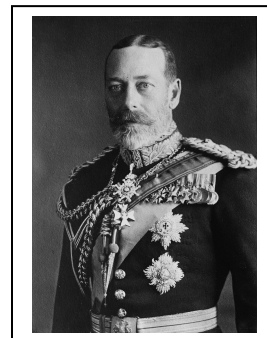


(Right above: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)



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

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, were then sent south to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot; meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived ‘E’ and ‘F’\*, were ordered to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, where they were to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion.

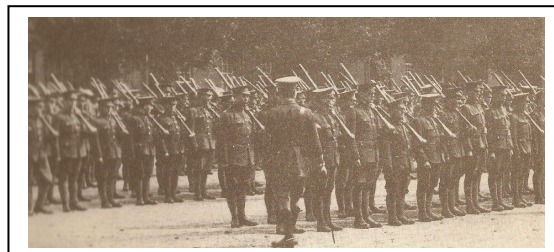


(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)

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

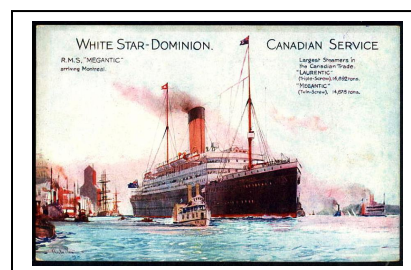
It had then been during that period spent at Aldershot that Private Sparkes of ‘A’ Company – he was not alone in doing so - had been prevailed upon, he on August 14, to re-enlist *for the duration of the war\**.

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



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

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



On August 20, 1915, Private Sparkes and his comrades-in-arms 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 two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, he and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment dis-embarked at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

(continued)



**(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 Private Sparkes served during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)**

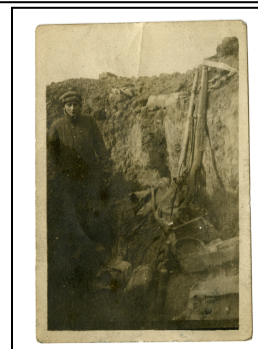


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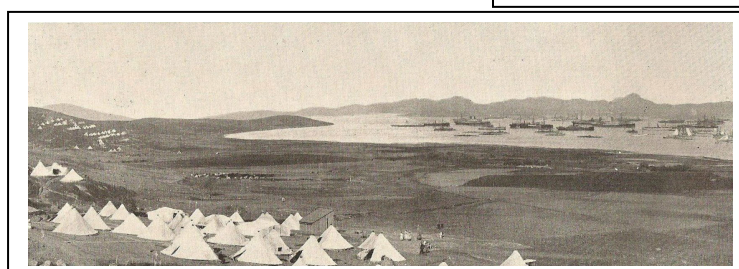
Private Sparkes was evacuated from the trenches at Suvla on December 5, 1915, and shuttled to the 24<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearance Station at *Mudros Bay* on the Greek island of Lemnos some fifty kilometres distant. He was suffering from septic sores. There appear to be no further details of his treatment.

Only days before this episode, on November 26 and the days following, a disastrous freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm, plus the subsequent flood had inundated the positions of both sides at *Suvla Bay*. Whether, however, there was any direct relationship between that and Private Sparkes’ sores is not recorded: it was nevertheless unlikely to have ameliorated his condition.

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



**(Right: By the end of the year 1915, the bay and the inadequate harbour at Mudros Bay were almost entirely surrounded by French and British – including Canadian and Australian - medical facilities, the majority of them under canvas. – image from Illustration)**



Discharged to duty to the Divisional Base Depot at Sidi Bishr in the vicinity of the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria on January 13 of the New Year, 1916, Private Sparkes was not to re-join his 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion until some eight weeks later again, on March 7, at Port Tewfiq.

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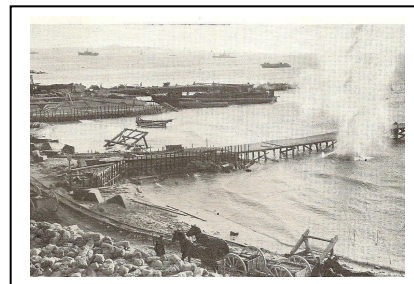
Even before the time of Private Sparkes' departure for medical care, the operation at *Suvla Bay*, and indeed the entire *Gallipoli Campaign* itself was proving to be a debacle: Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and the casualties inflicted by an enemy who was to fight a great deal better than the British High Command\* had ever anticipated – were eventually to overwhelm the British-led forces and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

*\*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.*

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



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



The British and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps also served at *Gallipoli* – were now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* was undertaken. The operation took place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion providing some of the rear-guard for this second occasion as well\*.



(Right above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was 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 above: *'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces and by the Newfoundlanders who were the last soldiers off the beach: vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

(continued)



(Preceding page: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were among the last to leave on two occasions, at Suvla Bay and at Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis from Illustration*)

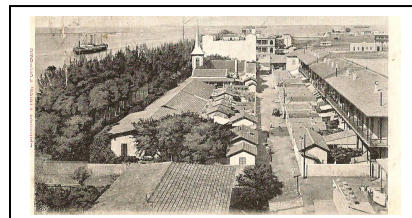
When the British evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was ordered shipped to Alexandria, arriving there on the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then immediately transferred southward to Suez, one of the ports at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders as, at the time, the subsequent destination of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's 29<sup>th</sup> Division had not yet been decided\*.

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

After a two-month interim, on March 14, the Newfoundlanders embarked through Port Tewfiq, also at the southern end of the *Suez Canal*, for the French port of *Marseilles*, and disembarked there on March 22, en route to the *Western Front*.

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

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

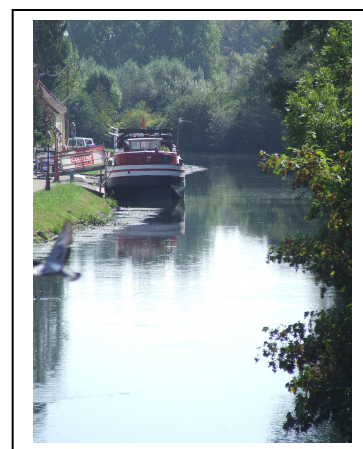


And it had been at Suez, of course, that on March 7, Private Sparkes reported back to duty, only one week before the Newfoundland Battalion was to board His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* to traverse the Mediterranean on its way to France.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Battalion's train arrived at the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for them travelling unused in a separate wagon. De-training at the station at two in the morning the Newfoundlanders still had a long march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

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



It is doubtful that any of those tired soldiers paid much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge that they passed on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* would be a part of their history.

(continued)

On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion entered into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy – where it was billeted, received re-enforcements and, after two days' time, was introduced to the British lines of the *Western Front* to be immediately put to work to improve the condition of the nearby communication trenches.

(Right: part of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2007(?))



Only days later again, two Companies – ‘A’, that of Private Sparkes, and ‘B’ – had taken over some support positions from a British unit\* before the entire Newfoundland unit moved 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 the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles. This was also true on the day of the attack on July 1.*

For the remainder of the spring of 1916, the Newfoundlanders were to be preparing for the British campaign of that upcoming summer, the battles to be fought on the ground named for the innocuous, meandering river flowing through the region, and over which the parent unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had marched only some few weeks previously at Pont-Rémy: *the Somme*.

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 sustained while advancing 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: *Beaumont-Hamel* is a commune, not a village (see below). – 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.*



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 would prove to be the biggest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps worse, it was to continue for the next four and a half months.

The son of Anastasia (also found as *Ann, Annie and Anna*) Sparkes (née *Keefe*) of Lance Cove, Bell Island, to whom he had allotted a daily eighty cents from his pay - his father, George, a farmer (deceased in June of 1898) from Lance Cove, Bell Island - he was from a family of seven children: a brother, Michael living in the United States, and five sisters: one widowed, Mary; Mrs John O'Brien; Mrs. Patrick O'Brien; Mrs. Patrick(?) Myers; and Annie Sparkes (sic).



(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 from 2009*)

Private Sparkes was reported as *missing in action* at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'A' Company during the fighting on the first day of *the Somme*. Some six months later, on December 31, 1916, he was officially *presumed dead*.



George Joseph Sparkes had enlisted at the *declared* age of nineteen years and seven months: date of birth at Lance Cove, Bell Island, Newfoundland, December 3, 1896 (from Newfoundland Birth Register).

After her son's decease, his mother went to live with one of her daughters, Mrs. Patrick O'Brien, at the time residing in Topsail.



(Right above: *a grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after the action at Beaumont-Hamel - from ...*)

(*The photograph of Private Sparkes is from the Provincial Archives.*)

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



**The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 11, 2023.**