



Lieutenant William Owen Steele (Regimental Number 326*) is interred in Maily-Maillet Communal Cemetery Extension – D. 10.

(Above left: The reconstructed village of Maily-Maillet where Lieutenant Steele is buried – twinned with Torbay, St. John's East – and its Monument aux Morts (French war dead) – photograph from 2007)

***Officers who were eventually promoted from the ranks may be identified from their Regimental Number. Other officers who were not from the ranks received the King's Commission, or in the case of those in the Newfoundland Regiment, an Imperial Commission, and were not considered as enlisted. These officers thus had no Regimental Number allotted to them.**

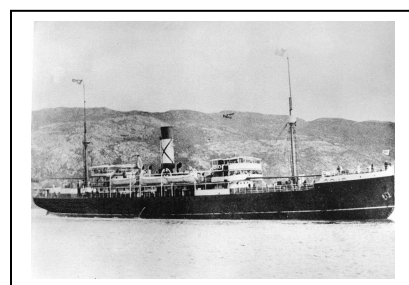
And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist 'for the duration', even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.

His occupation prior to enlistment recorded as that of salesman earning an annual sixteen-hundred dollars with the family firm* of *S. O. Steele* on Water Street East, and apparently a well-known local athlete, Owen Steele was a recruit of the First Draft. On September 3, 1914, he presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, for a medical examination. It was a procedure which would pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service.*

He was then to enlist ten days later, on September 13 - engaged at the private soldier's rate of \$1.10 per diem, this including a daily ten-cent Field Allowance – and was, eight days later again, promoted directly to the rank of sergeant, on September 21. That September 13 is also the date on which he is recorded as having attested – although either October 1 and 2 are also suggested.

**Perhaps appropriately, the Steele Company premises used to be on Water Street in St. John's, next to where the National War Memorial stands today.*

Sergeant Steele was then to embark on October 3, the day that he was appointed to the rank of colour sergeant, with the *First Five Hundred* – also to come be known as the *Blue Puttees* - onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting this first Newfoundland contingent in St. John's Harbour. The ship would sail for the United Kingdom on the following day, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.



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

In the United Kingdom Lance Corporal Ryall 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 was to provide 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.

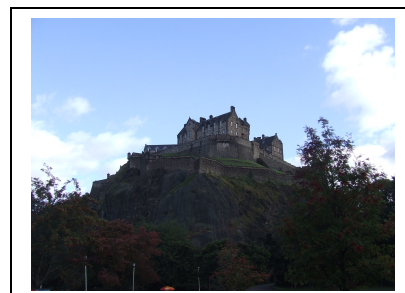


(Right above: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011*)

It was while at Edinburgh that Sergeant Steele was appointed to Command Rank on April 22 and, four days later, on the 26th, that he was granted an Imperial Commission and the accompanying promotion to the rank of second lieutenant – with its two-dollar-per-diem remuneration.

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



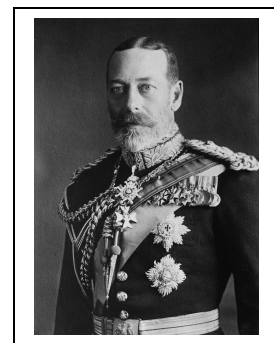
At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’, were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot. Meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived ‘E’ and ‘F’*, were sent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



(Right: *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)

(Right below: *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 of the 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.



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

On August 20 of 1915, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had 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 where, a month later – having spent two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on the night of September 19-20, the Newfoundland force was to land at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*



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

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



Twenty-five days after having stepped ashore on Kangaroo Beach at Suvla Bay, Second Lieutenant Steele was further promoted, being appointed to the rank of First Lieutenant on October 15.

But by now, it was evident that things were not going well.

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire Gallipoli Campaign, including the operation at Suvla Bay, would prove to be little more than a debacle:

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

(Right below: An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from the 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 Bay, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.**

November 26 had seen the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes during the Gallipoli Campaign. A freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm had struck the Suvla Bay area on that day and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides.



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For several days, survival from the wrath of nature rather than from that of the enemy was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties in both camps, 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 had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite but the end of the *Gallipoli Campaign* had already been in sight. After the storm, the Newfoundlanders were to remain stationed at *Suvla Bay* for only a further twenty-five days.

By that time they were to have served there for exactly three months to the day.

On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.



Some of the Battalion personnel had been evacuated to the nearby island of Imbros, some to Lemnos, further away, but in neither case was the respite to be of a long duration; the 1st Battalion was to be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

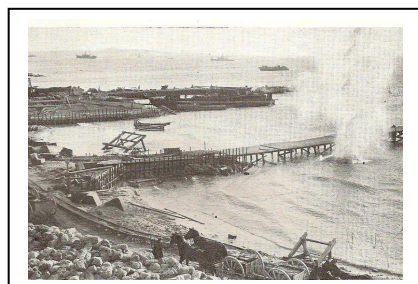
(Right above: *Cape Helles as seen from the Turkish positions on the misnamed Achi Baba, positions which were never breached. The Newfoundland positions were to the right-hand side of the picture. – photograph from 2011*)

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

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

Lieutenant Steele's service in *Gallipoli* and that of the Newfoundland Battalion were both noteworthy: as mentioned above the unit was to provide a rear-guard at both *Suvla Bay* in that December of 1915, and *Cape Helles*, some three weeks later, in January of 1916, during the British withdrawals from the Dardanelles. Lieutenant Steele was the commanding officer.

In fact, Lieutenant Steele is documented as having been the last man of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force off '*W*' Beach and into the final boat at the conclusion of the evacuation. He was to escort General Maude, commanding officer of the British force, who had lost his way.



(Right: '*W*' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation in January of 1916 – from *Illustration*)

(Right below: *The same 'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

When the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, to arrive there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.

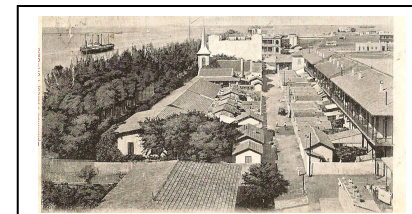


**Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.*

(Right: *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 sail up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of *Marseilles*, on March 22.



(Right above: *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 post-card*)



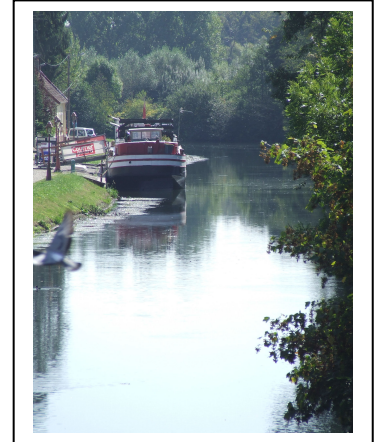
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train had found its way to the small provincial town of *Pont-Rémy*, a thousand kilometres to the north of *Marseilles*. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having travelled 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*.

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It is doubtful if many of those tired soldiers were to pay much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they had then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to become a part of their history.

On April 13, the 1st Battalion had marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.



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

Just days following the Newfoundland Battalion's arrival on the *Western Front*, two of the four Companies – 'A', and 'B' – were to take over several support positions from a British unit* before the entire Newfoundland unit was to then be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.



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

**It should be mentioned that the Newfoundland Battalion and two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles who were serving in the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment Battalion, were the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles at that time - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.*

The Newfoundlanders were now soon to be preparing for the British campaign of that summer, to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, that flowed – and still does so today – through the region.

If there is one name and date in Newfoundland history which is etched in the collective once-national memory, it is that of Beaumont-Hamel on July 1 of 1916; and if any numbers are remembered, they are those of the eight-hundred who went *over the top* in the third wave of the attack on that morning, and of the sixty-eight unwounded present at muster some twenty-four hours later*.



(Right above: *Beaumont-Hamel: Looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which today stands atop part of the German front-line defences: The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009*)

(Right: A view of Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?))



**Perhaps ironically, the majority of the Battalion's casualties was to be incurred during the advance from the third line of British trenches to the first line from where the attack proper was to be made, and while struggling through British wire laid to protect the British positions from any German attack.*

There are other numbers of course: the fifty-seven thousand British casualties incurred in four hours on that same morning of which nineteen-thousand were recorded as having been *killed in action or died of wounds*.

It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the butchery of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.



(Right above: *Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village.* – photographs from 2010 and 2015)

In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was a commune – it still exists today – at the time comprising two communities: Beaumont, a village on the German side of the lines, and Hamel which was behind those of the British. No-Man's-Land, on which the Newfoundland Memorial Park lies partially today, was on land that separated Beaumont from Hamel.



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

Lieutenant Steele, however, was not to figure in the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, the first day of *the Somme*. Although Commanding Officer of 'D' Company (or perhaps *because* he was Commanding Officer) some sources* have him being one of the reserve of fourteen officers and eighty-three *other ranks* which was held behind at Lourencourt and called to the field only later in the day when the fighting had all but abated**.



**Even so, his name does not appear documented in at least one nominal roll of those in the ten per cent reserve.*

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*****The well-known roll-call of July 2 of those who survived the battle unscathed was not officially recorded until two days later. The roll call of those who had been in the ten per cent reserve of fourteen officers and eighty-three men held back for most of the day at Louvencourt was apparently also recorded only later. Thus the inscription 'With Battalion 4/7/16' on certain records.***

(Preceding page: A further part of the reconstituted battlefield, here showing the British front lines, in the Newfoundland Park at Beaumont-Hamel: today the wire serves only to keep the tourists out of the trenches. – photograph from 2010(?))

Some six days later, he was critically wounded days later by a German shell, on July 6: 'We were out of the trenches on the 6th in billets at Englebelmer. He (Lt. Steele) was on the street and was hit by a piece of high-explosive shell and died two days later. The shell struck a house near him and knocked it into smithereens and a piece of the shell hit him in the side.' – C.S.M. Godden, Number 615

He was thereupon admitted into the 87th Field Ambulance.

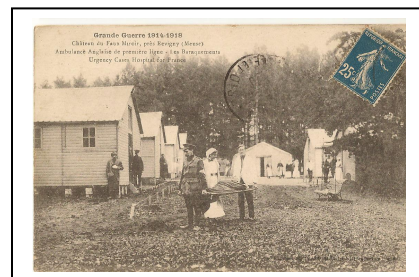
A native of St. John's, he was the oldest son of Samuel Owen Steele - Crockery, Glass and Chinaware Merchant - and Sarah Blanche Steele (née Harris) of Avalonia, Kings Kerswell, Newton Abbot, England, and of 100 Water Street, St. John's. The couple had married in England on May 20, 1886.



He was also brother to Beatrice-Grace, to James-Robert*, to Victor and to Samuel-Richard.**

Lieutenant Steele was reported as having *died of wounds* by the Commanding Officer of the 87th Field Ambulance Station on July 7-8, 1916.

(Right: A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card)



(The photograph of Lieutenant Steele above is from Provincial Archives.)

****Lieutenant James Robert Steele, Regimental Number 926, was wounded in the head at Beaumont-Hamel and was subsequently hospitalized for ninety-three days. He returned to duty on the Continent and survived the War.***

*****Victor Steele enlisted in early April of 1918 only to be discharged within weeks of having done so.***

Lieutenant Steele was buried on the day of his death, July 8, in Maily-Maillet New Cemetery by the officer commanding the 87th Field Ambulance.

Owen William Steele had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-seven years of age: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, April 28, 1887 (from a copy of Congregational Church Records).

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From Lieutenant Steele's diaries much information has been gleaned a propos the early period of the 1st Battalion's war, perhaps particularly the Gallipoli episode where the Battalion's own War Diary was misplaced.

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



I am now in receipt of a reply from Captain Timewell in which he states, as follows:

In answer to your telegram twelfth July. Unofficial – Lieutenant Steele – shell burst close to billet – compound fracture of thigh – leg amputated – death after operation – every effort is being made obtain effects.

Yours faithfully,
J. R. Bennett

Colonial Secretary

(from correspondence to Mr. S. O. Steele)

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