



Private Walter Thomas (Regimental Number 722) lies in Birmingham (*Lodge Hill*) Cemetery – Grave reference Screen Wall B10. 4. 404C – and is buried under marker Number 85.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of a *machinist* working on Bell Island for the *Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Company* and earning forty-five dollars a month, Walter Thomas presented himself for medical examination on December 7 of 1914, in the mining community of Bell Island. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*. He was a recruit of the Second Draft.

A week and two days later, having made the short journey from Bell Island to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, Walter Thomas was to report to the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road, there to enlist – engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar a day plus a ten-cent *Field Allowance*. It appears that he was also to attest on that same December 16.

Now for Private Thomas, Number 722, there was to be a seven-week waiting period.

On the fourth day of February of 1915, the first reinforcements – this was ‘C’ Company - for the Newfoundland contingent – it was not yet at battalion strength - which by this time was serving in Scotland (see further below), were to embark via the sealing tender *Neptune* onto the SS *Dominion* – the vessel having anchored to the south of St. John’s, off Bay Bulls, because of ice conditions.



The vessel was then to sail - and Private Thomas thus departed Newfoundland for overseas service - a day later again, on February 5, for trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *The image of the steamer ‘Dominion’ - launched in 1894 as the ‘Prussia’ - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. An older vessel, she was to be requisitioned during the latter part of the Great War as a store and supply ship. She survived the conflict to be scrapped in 1922.*)

**There appears to be some confusion in some sources as to whether these troops were ‘C’ or ‘D’ Company. However, ‘D’ Company was to go overseas some time later on ‘Stephano’ to Halifax and then on ‘Orduña’ to Liverpool.*

(Right above: *The photograph of personnel of ‘C’ Company on board the ‘Neptune’ on the way to the harbour at Bay Bulls is from the Provincial Archives.*)

Having disembarked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool, the Newfoundlanders entrained for Edinburgh, the first Newfoundland Regiment contingent having by this time been posted to the historic Castle in Scotland’s capital city. There they were to provide the garrison, thus being the first unit from overseas ever to do so.



Private Thomas and the other new-comers reported to duty at Edinburgh Castle on February 16.

(Right above: *Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011*)

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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 - to become ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies - during which time the authorities had also been preparing for the Regiment’s transfer overseas.

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This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after 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.



The ship would sail 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.

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

(Right adjacent: *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 – and where 'C' Company and Private Thomas, as also cited beforehand, would arrive from Newfoundland on February 16 of 1915.

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Some three months later, on May 11, and three weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit was ordered moved 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 received the reinforcements 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 eligible to be sent on 'active service'.

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)



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

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at 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 during this period at Aldershot, on August 15, that Private Thomas was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion 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 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.)

On August 20, 1915, Private Thomas and the 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 landed 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 of the Newfoundland Regiment was to serve during the autumn of 1915 – photograph from 2011)



When the Newfoundlanders landed from their transport ship at Suvla Bay on that September night of 1915 they were to disembark into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion was to serve but, even ever since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire Gallipoli Campaign, including the operation at Suvla Bay, had proved 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 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.**

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Just over four weeks after having set foot on the sand and stone – mostly the latter - of Kangaroo Beach, on October 20 Private Thomas was evacuated from *Suvla Bay* and taken on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Dover Castle* – possibly having first been ferried to the Greek island of Lemnos. He had been diagnosed as suffering from dysentery, and was admitted into the Citadel Military Hospital in Cairo five days later, on October 25.



(Right above: *The image of Dover Castle in her war-time hospital ship garb is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. She was playing this role in May of 1917, sailing from Malta to Gibraltar, when she was struck by a torpedo. Two-hundred seventy survivors were taken off her – seven lives were lost – by an accompanying hospital ship, Karapara, and taken to Gibraltar, while Dover Castle's captain and a volunteer crew attempted to save the vessel. However, hours later, the U-boat struck again and the vessel sank in just three minutes.*)

(Right: *The Egyptian capital city, Cairo, at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



After convalescence, Private Thomas was discharged, on December 8, to the British Base Depot (at Sidi Bishr, Alexandria?) and re-joined the Newfoundland Battalion, by that time evacuated from *Gallipoli* and back in Egypt, on January 26 of the New Year, 1916.

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In the meantime, during the three-month period of Private Thomas' absence from his unit, things had been to worsening at *Gallipoli** for the British in general and for the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment in particular.

**The French know the place as 'Les Dardanelles' while the Turks call it 'Çanakkale'.*

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 was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties on both sides, some of them, surprised by the sudden inundation of their positions, fatalities who had drowned in their trenches – although no Newfoundlanders were to be among that number. Numerous, however, were those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

As the days, weeks and months passed at *Suvla Bay*, the British position there was to become more and more untenable and thus on the night of December 19-20, they abandoned the area – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.



(Preceding page: *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 would the respite be of a long duration; the 1st 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 now 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.

****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 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 would then immediately 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 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)*



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

After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1st Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage 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: *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 reinforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

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



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****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.

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.***

(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*.

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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.



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

Private Thomas was wounded in the arm and right loin, the right buttock and both hips, at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with ‘C’ Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*. Evacuated at first to the 87th Field Ambulance perhaps up to two days after the event, he was subsequently admitted to an unspecified casualty clearing station from there on July 3, before then being forwarded on to the 2nd General Hospital in Le Havre.



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



(Right below: *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*)



At Le Havre it was decided to transfer Private Thomas back to the United Kingdom and, on July 5, he was placed on board His Majesty’s *New Zealand Hospital Ship Marama* for the short cross-Channel passage. Having arrived in England, he was transported to and was admitted into the 2nd Birmingham War Hospital at Northfield.



(Right: *The port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Born in St. John's, the son of Charles Henry Thomas (former blacksmith* and machinist deceased February 27, 1908, a family source citing as the result of a mine explosion) and of Isabel Thomas (née *Pretty****) – to whom he had allocated a daily sixty cents from his pay - of Bell Island (she later of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, Canada, before returning to Newfoundland), he was also brother to Maria-May, Elsie-Isabel, William-Hubert Charles-Gilbert, Hugh-Henry and Augustus (Private, Number 3821 of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, who survived the conflict having served in the field from late May of 1918 until October 26 of the same year) and to Florence.

**It appears that the family was to reside in St. John's until at least 1904 and that during this period Charles Henry Thomas practised the trade of blacksmith. He was apparently to work on Bell Island as a machinist.*

***The couple had been married in St. John's on April 30, 1887.*

(Right: The image of HMNZHS Marama, seen here in her white war-time hospital ship garb, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. She began her career for the Union Company of New Zealand in 1907, to be requisitioned at the onset of the Great War for use as a hospital ship. Having survived the conflict she offered trans-Pacific service in the 1920s before being employed on the New Zealand to Tasmania route. Marama was scrapped in 1937.)



Private Thomas was reported to have *died of wounds - and of infection, cystitis and heart failure* - on July 15, 1916, in hospital in Birmingham. At home it was the Reverend John Stead who was requested to bear the news to his family*.

**Apparently his widowed mother had moved from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia only one week before receiving the news of her son's death.*



Walter Thomas, apparently to his friends known as *Hatty*, had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-five years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, October 15, 1889 (from the Church of England Cathedral of St. John the Baptist Records).

(Right above: the Military plot at Lodge Hill Cemetery, Birmingham, with the screen wall to the right – photograph from 2011)

Private Walter Thomas 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).

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An account of the Funeral of Regimental Number 722, Private Walter Thomas, died July 15, 1916, and interred on the following day at Birmingham (Lodge Hill Cemetery)

"... The body was brought to the Cemetery in a hearse; the coffin was made of beautifully-polished chestnut and after being taken from the hearse was borne shoulder-high by six stalwart privates of the R.A.M.C.. The body was first taken into the chapel and the Anglican service was read by the Reverend W.T. Clements of the Second Birmingham War Hospital who himself was present when Walter Thomas died. The body was preceded to the grave by a contingent of about twenty soldiers, these coming first in the procession; then the six bearers carrying the coffin. The coffin was covered with the Union Jack and covered with flowers. On top of the coffin was placed the dead soldier's hat; following the coffin came the sergeant of the company and after him the officer in command who came as a representative of the Colonel of the R.A.M.C.. The service was a long and dignified one, the tread of the procession being at very slow march, all taking slow steps. It took a long time for the procession to walk even from the chapel to the grave-side.

It was a lovely day. The sun shone bright and it was beautiful. The grave is in Lodge Hill Cemetery, Selly Oak, about four miles south-west of Birmingham. It is a most beautiful cemetery on the very highest ground in the neighbourhood of Birmingham. As we stood on the hill we could see for miles around us. We have many friends buried there. The soldiers' plot is on the western slope and in the centre of the graves is a large cross standing about 12' high on which are written the following words "Here rest the bodies of soldiers who have given their lives for their country in the great war" and on the cross are printed all the names of those who are buried there. Already over ninety lie in the same group. They are buried four in a grave. The number of the grave in which Thomas is buried is 404*. In the group there are people from all over the world: two Belgians' several New-Zealanders, Australians, Canadians, but he is the first Newfoundlander**.

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The wreath from the Newfoundland Contingent was a very beautiful one. Among other flowers I observed a beautiful bunch of roses from Elsie D. Braham of 35, Stirling Road, Egbaston. I do not know who the lady is, and I do not think she was at the grave-side, though there were a number of friends who gathered about while the burial service was being read.

When the service was completed the officer ordered the soldiers to stand at alert and the last post was sounded. I am sure it could be heard for miles around. It made a thrilling climax to the quiet and dignified service.

After the service was over I had a talk with the officer and the clergyman and I have asked the clergyman to write concerning the death of Walter Thomas. He has promised to do so. He does not know the address of his friends. If you will send it to me or send it directly to Mr. Clement at the Second Birmingham War Hospital, I think he would send a letter that Thomas' friends would like to have.

I may tell you, however, that there was no hope for a recovery from the first. He was badly wounded through the body and lay for three days on the battlefield before he was brought in. The clergyman was with him when he died.

All I can add to this letter is a word of appreciation for the Newfoundlanders who have suffered so severely of late and for this lad who gave himself for his country. The parents ought to feel comforted in knowing that his life was given for others and that he died as he lived: courageously. And let me ensure his friends that everything has been done that could be done in the honour of a brave man.

Sincerely yours,
G. Hamilton Archibald

George Hamilton Archibald was the uncle of a certain Mr. Archibald working at the time in the Newfoundland Pay & Records Office in London, and who had been asked by the latter to attend the funeral of Private Thomas.

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****The enumeration of the different graves has evolved from that day in July of 1916 when Private Thomas was interred. His remains today lie under the plaque numbered 85, and his name is inscribed on the Screen Wall.***

*****He is probably still the only Newfoundlander to lie there; he is certainly the only one from the Newfoundland Regiment.***

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 19, 2023.