



Second Lieutenant James John Tobin (Regimental Number 69*) lies in Marcoing British Cemetery – Grave reference II. E. 11.

****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.***

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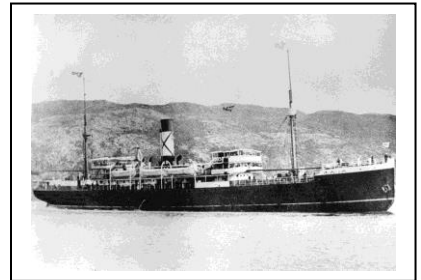
And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist ‘for the duration’, even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of **salesman*** and **barber** earning a weekly ten dollars, James John Tobin was a recruit of the First Draft. He presented himself for medical examination on August 26, 1914 – three weeks and a day after the **Declaration of War** – at the **Church Lads Brigade Armoury** on Harvey Road in St. John’s, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland.

****This was in the United States where the family – the father deceased by this time – was recorded as living by the year 1910. That same census records young John James Tobin to be employed as a salesman.***

A week later, on September 2, he enlisted at the same **C.L.B. Armoury** – engaged at the daily private soldier’s rate of a single dollar plus a ten-cent per diem **Field Allowance** – before then undergoing a four-week period of training on the shores of **Quidi Vidi Lake** in the East End of the city.

Private Tobin subsequently attested on October 1. October 3, 1914, two days later again, was the day on which he and the Newfoundland contingent, known to history as both the **First Five Hundred** and the **Blue Puttees** – the unit was not yet a battalion - embarked onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel **Florizel** awaiting in St. John’s Harbour.



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

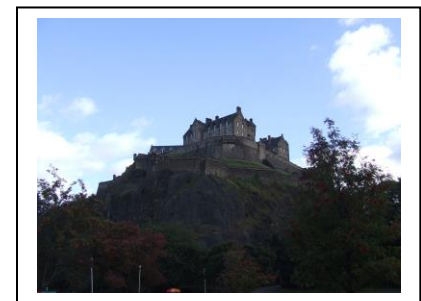
The ship sailed from St. John’s for the United Kingdom on the following day, October 4, via the south coast of the Island where it was to rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas.



In the United Kingdom Private Tobin trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to the city of Inverness; then at Edinburgh Castle – where the unit was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

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

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



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On May 11 the Newfoundlanders, by this time numbering five companies, were transferred from the Scottish capital to a tented *Stobs Camp*, in the vicinity of the Scottish town of Hawick, where they were to undergo further training and exercises for some three months.



(Right above: *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 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, ‘E’ and the last-arrived ‘F’*, were ordered posted to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, where they were 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* – 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.*

It was likely during the second week of that final training at Aldershot, on or about August 13, that Private Tobin was prevailed upon 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.*

Having by the month of July, and with the arrival of ‘F’ Company (see above), the personnel necessary to comprise a battalion – plus a reserve - the four senior companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, were to become its first such force. The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had thereupon been attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and was preparing to be dispatched to *active service*.

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(Preceding page: *Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to leaving for active service in Gallipoli – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)*

On August 20, 1915, Private Tobin and the Newfoundland Battalion embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport on England's south coast, 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 set foot on the rock and sand 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.*)

(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*)



When the Newfoundlanders landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* they disembarked into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

(Right: *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*)



Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion would 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*, was to prove to be little more than a debacle:

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Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and of course the casualties inflicted by an enemy which 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 Provincial Archives*)

**Many of the commanders chosen had been second-rate, 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.*



November 26 would see the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes at Gallipoli; there was to be a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm to strike the *Suvla Bay* area and the subsequent floods 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, would be those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

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 would 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*)

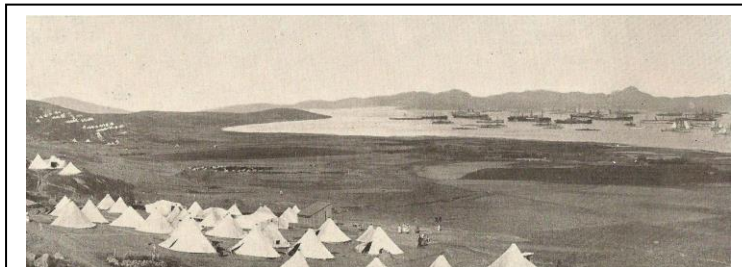
The British, Indian and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now to be only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

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The records do not tell us whether Private Tobin returned to the *Gallipoli Peninsula* when the Newfoundland Battalion was despatched to the area of *Cape Helles* immediately after its service at *Suvla Bay*, or if he was already ill by that time.

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Private Tobin was now admitted on December 24, Christmas Eve of 1915, into the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital*, West Mudros, on the Greek island of Lemnos, where he was diagnosed as suffering from jaundice.



Some two weeks later, on January 8, he was then forwarded to the 8th (Lowland) Convalescent Depot, also at West Mudros.

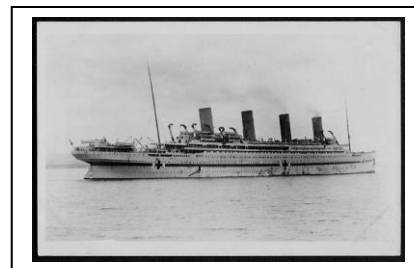
(Right above: Seen here towards the end of 1915, a crowded Mudros Bay and its minuscule harbour is almost surrounded by medical facilities, mostly under canvas. – from Illustration)

**No Canadian troops were to serve in the Gallipoli Campaign, the 3rd Stationary Hospital being perhaps the only Canadian presence in the eastern Mediterranean during this period. The hospital's matron and a nursing sister also lie in Portianos Cemetery, victims of dysentery.*



(Right: That part of Portianos Military Cemetery in which are to be found the graves of Nursing Sister M.F.E. Munro and Matron J.B. Jaggard of the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital. – photograph from 2011)

After a week of convalescence at the 8th (Lowland) C.D., Private Tobin was sent from West Mudros to the Base Depot at Alexandria, Egypt, on His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Egypt*. There he was transferred to the 21st General Hospital on January 16 of 1916 for treatment for debility. On the 28th day of that same month Private Tobin was embarked on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Britannic* to be invalided back to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: The photograph of the requisitioned White Star liner 'Britannic' seen here in use as a hospital ship is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Sister ship to both 'Olympic' and the ill-fated 'Titanic', she herself was to be sunk in the eastern Mediterranean in November of 1916.)

Having arrived back in the United Kingdom, on February 10 Private Tobin was admitted into the 1st Scottish General Hospital in the city of Aberdeen to be treated for dysentery. He was not to be released from there for more than two months – in fact, for a total of seventy-six days.

Discharged *for disposal* to the Regimental Depot at Ayr on April 27, he returned to Newfoundland for an extended six-week furlough in early May. As the date of his arrival in Newfoundland is recorded as having been May 30, it is likely that he travelled on either *Sicilian* or *Metagama* to Quebec City before then continuing his journey by train and ferry – this, however, is nowhere documented in his files.

That six-week furlough was now to be prolonged until July 19 when he embarked for direct passage to the United Kingdom on July 19 - along with five-hundred five other Newfoundland military personnel, re-enforcements for the 1st Battalion - aboard His Majesty's Transport *Sicilian**.

During that time spent in Newfoundland, Private Tobin, on or about June 2, had made application for a Commission.



(Right above: *The image of the SS Sicilian, seen here in its Allan Line colours, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

**Some sixteen years previously - as of 1899 when she was launched – the vessel had served as a troop-ship and transport during another conflict, carrying men, animals and equipment to South Africa for use during the Second Boer War.*

Apparently Sicilian was not a requisitioned troop-carrier: she ran the commercial routes from Great Britain to Canada, only occasionally accommodating military units.

Upon his return to England he was posted to Aldershot, being reported there on August 10, and still signing his letter of that date as Private Tobin. Perhaps it was at Aldershot that he received promotion – by the end of October he apparently would hold the rank of sergeant - but no further details seem to be recorded.

Sergeant Tobin was now to be granted an Imperial Commission and an accompanying appointment to the rank of second lieutenant on November 1, 1916, during a further posting to Ayr.

The Regimental Depot at the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland had been established to serve as a base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment during the summer of 1915 and it was from there – as of November of 1915 up until January of 1918 that re-enforcements from home were to be despatched to the 1st Battalion, at first to the Middle East, and then later to the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were quartered the 'other ranks', is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right. – by 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.*



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Second Lieutenant Tobin is reported as having been officially transferred to the British Expeditionary Force on May 4, 1917. He was likely one of the group of officers reported as travelling through London at that time *en route* to the Continent.



(Right: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The Regimental War Diary seems not to record the arrival of any officers until June even though the Newfoundland Battalion at the end of May would appear to have numbered only eleven officers and two-hundred ten other ranks. The newcomer officers were perhaps held the 29th Division Base Depot recently in the vicinity of Rouen for some undocumented reason.

The next occasion on which Second Lieutenant Tobin's name would be entered into his journal by the Newfoundland Battalion's War Diarist was to be on August 16, the day of the attack at the *Steenbeek*.

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Only two weeks after Private Tobin's hospitalization on December 24 at Mudros, the final operation of the *Gallipoli Campaign* had taken place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the British rear-guard on this second occasion also.



(Right: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only 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.*



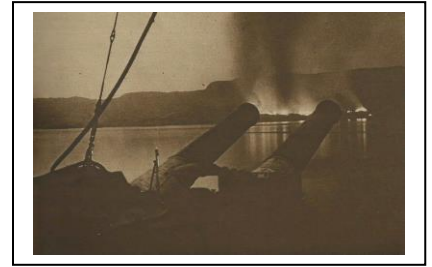
(Right: *'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

Immediately after 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 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*.

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***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 were to board 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)

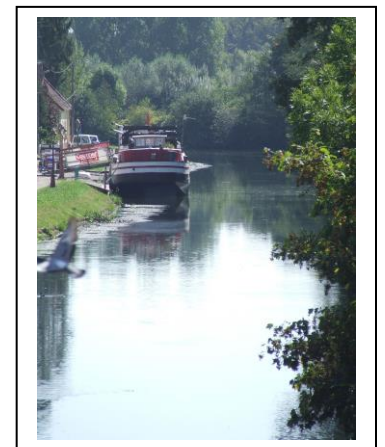
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of *Pont-Rémy*, a thousand kilometres to the north of *Marseilles*. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably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

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.

**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: *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...?)

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.

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 a German counter-assault might well annihilate what had managed to survive 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.



It had then been a further two days before the unit had marched further again to the rear area and to billets in the village of Maily-Maillet.

(Right above: The re-constructed village of Maily-Maillet – the French Monument aux Morts in the foreground - is twinned with the community of Torbay, St. John’s East. – photograph from 2009)

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

On July 27-28 of 1916, the 1st Battalion - still under establishment battalion strength at only five-hundred fifty-four strong, even after further re-enforcement – had moved north and entered into the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the first time.

It 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.

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

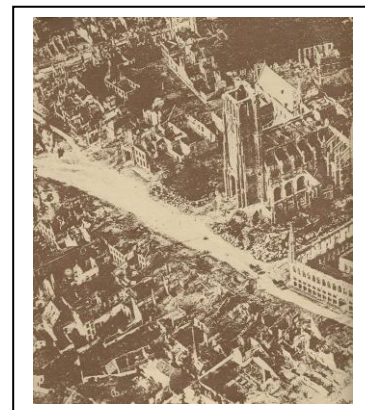
The Salient – close to the front lines for almost the entire fifty-two month conflict - was to be relatively quiet during the time of the Newfoundlanders' posting there; yet they nonetheless incurred casualties, a number – fifteen? - of them fatal.



Then on October 8, after having served in Belgium for some ten weeks, the Newfoundland Battalion had been ordered to return south, back into France and back into the area of – and the battle of – *the Somme*.

(Right: *An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the 'Ville morte'. – from Illustration*)

Four days after that return to France, on October 12, 1916, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had again been ordered to the offensive; it was to be at a place called Gueudecourt, the vestiges of a village some dozen or so kilometres to the south-east of Beaumont-Hamel.



The encounter had proved to be another ill-conceived and costly affair – two hundred and thirty-nine casualties all told - for little gain.

(Right below: *This is the ground over which the 1st Battalion advanced and then mostly conceded at Gueudecourt on October 12. Some few managed to reach the area where today stand the copse of trees and the Gueudecourt Caribou, on the far right horizon. – photograph from 2007*)

The Newfoundland Battalion was not to be directly involved in any further concerted infantry action in the immediate area of Gueudecourt although, on October 18, the unit would be ordered to supply some two-hundred fifty men to act as stretcher-bearers in an attack to be undertaken by troops of two British regiments, the Hampshires and the Worcestershires, of the 88th Brigade.



On October 30, the Newfoundland Battalion had eventually been retired to rear positions from the Gueudecourt area. By then it had been serving in front-line and support positions for three weeks less a day.

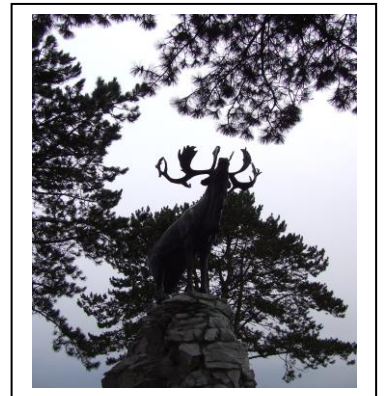
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The Newfoundlanders were now to spend two weeks withdrawn to the area of Ville-sous-Corbie, re-enforcing and reorganizing. It was not to be until November 15 that the 1st Battalion began to wend its way back up to the front lines.



(Right: *Stretcher-bearers not only shared the dangers of the battle-field with their arms-bearing comrades, but they often spent a longer period of time exposed to those same perils. This photograph was likely taken during First Somme. – from Illustration)*

There it had continued its watch in and out of the trenches of *the Somme* – not without casualties – during the late fall and early winter, a period broken only by another several weeks spent in *Corps Reserve* during the Christmas period, encamped well behind the lines and in close proximity to the city of Amiens.



(Right: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt which stands at the furthest point of the Newfoundland Battalion's advance of October 12, 1916 – photograph from 2012)*

(Right below: *A typical British Army Camp during rather inclement winter conditions somewhere on the Continent – from a vintage post-card)*

It had not been until January 11 that the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered out of *Corps Reserve* and its lodgings at *Camps en Amienois* from where it would make its way on foot to the community of Airaines. From the railway station there it had entrained for the small town of Corbie where it had thereupon taken over billets which it had already occupied for a short period only two months before.



After that recent six-week Christmas respite spent in *Corps Reserve* far to the rear, the Newfoundlanders were to *officially* return to *active service* on January 23, although they apparently had already returned to the trenches by that date and had incurred their first casualties – and fatality – of 1917.

Those casualties, however, had been only some of those everyday thousands whom Douglas Haig casually referred to as *wastage* as the Newfoundland unit had not ventured from its trenches.

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



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



(Right: *The fighting during the period of the Battalion's posting to Sailly-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(?)*)

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

They had even had the pleasure of a visit from the Regimental Band, and also one from the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, the latter 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 had begun to make 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 Grande Place in Arras in early 1916 after less than two years of bombardment: a further two and a-half years were yet to come. – from Illustration*)

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

On April 9 the British Army was to launch 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.



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

(continued)

(Right below: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen today from the western – in 1917, the British – side of the community: The 1st Battalion advanced, out of the ruins of the place, to the east, away from the camera. – photograph from 2013*)

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*.



**It was also an action in which a DSO, an MC and eight MMs were won by a small group of nine personnel of the Battalion – the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) awarded to the unit's Commanding officer. An MM for the same action was also presented to a private from the Essex Regiment .*

After this further debacle the remnants of the Newfoundland Battalion had remained in the area of Monchy-le-Preux. Its casualty count had been high enough to warrant that it and the Essex Regiment, which had also incurred heavy losses, be amalgamated into a composite battalion until such time as incoming re-enforcements would allow the two units' strengths to once more resemble those of bona fide battalions.

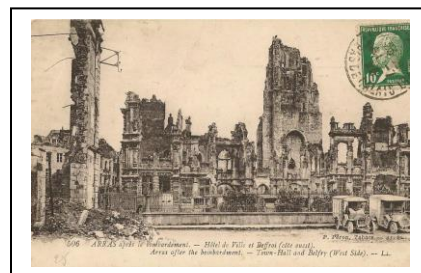
The final action in which the Newfoundland Battalion was to be involved during the five-week long *Battle of Arras* would be the engagement of April 23 at *Les Fosses Farm*.

This above-mentioned operation was in fact an element of a larger offensive undertaken at the time by units of the British 5th, 3rd and 1st Armies. It was apparently not to be a particularly successful venture, at least not in the area of the Newfoundland Battalion, several of the adjacent units reporting having been driven back by German counter-attacks, actions accompanied by heavy losses.

Late on that same evening the Newfoundlanders had retired to the relative calm of Arras.

(Right: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

That month of May was to be a period when the Newfoundlanders would move hither and thither on the *Arras Front*, marching into and out of the trenches. While there was to be the ever-present artillery-fire, concerted infantry activity, particularly after May 15 – *officially* the last day of the *Battle of Arras* – had been limited, apart from the marching.



And it had been, of course, at or about this time that Second Lieutenant Tobin would be one of a number of junior officers to report *to duty* with the 1st Battalion.

* * * * *

At the outset of June, the Newfoundland unit retired from the line to Bonneville, there to spend its time again re-enforcing, re-organizing and in training for the upcoming British offensive of the summer – and as it would transpire, the autumn as well.



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

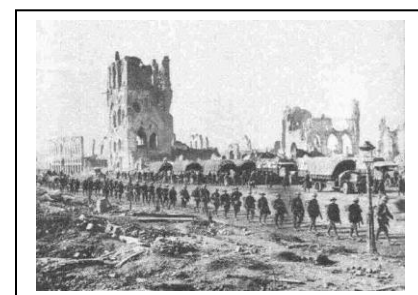
On a more personal note, it was during this period of the early summer that Second Lieutenant Tobin became a married man, by proxy, on July 18, 1917. The ceremony as such took place in Quebec City, on a day when Newfoundland Battalion – and Lieutenant Tobin - were out of the line and training in a new camp close to the Belgian town of Poperinghe. His bride, by the name of Margaret, was a private nurse and there was apparently a child, obviously conceived from before the marriage, but of whom little else appears to be recorded.

As cited in the above paragraph, by mid-July the Newfoundlanders had been ordered to move north into the *Kingdom of Belgium* – at the end of June - and once again into the vicinity of Ypres and...*the Salient*. The unit's first posting was to be to the banks of the *Yser Canal* at a locale just to the north of the city.



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

This low-lying area, Belgian *Flanders*, the only part of the country unoccupied by German forces during the Great War, had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of the British summer offensive of 1917. Unfortunately, while the geographical area could be chosen, the meteorological conditions - the weather – was a different matter...and it was to be one of the wettest and coldest summers and autumns on record.



(Right above: *Troops arriving from the railway station in single file, march past the vestiges of the historic Cloth Hall and through the rubble of the medieval city centre of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer or early autumn of 1917. – from *Illustration**)



(Right: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from *Illustration**)

Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was to come to be better known to history simply as *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a not-very high ridge to the north-east that later was to be cited as having been – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment would remain in Belgium until October 17, a small cog in the machinery of the British Army. This had been or was also to be the case with the Australians, the New Zealanders and the Canadians, all of whose troops had floundered or would soon flounder their way across the sodden and shell-torn countryside of Belgian Flanders.



Notably the Newfoundland Battalion at *Passchendaele* was to fight in two major engagements: at the *Steenbeek* on August 16; and at the *Broembeek* (see both immediately below) on October 9. At the former it incurred nine *killed in action*, ninety-three *wounded*, and one *missing in action*; at the *Broembeek* the cost would be higher: forty-eight *killed or died of wounds*, one-hundred thirty-two *wounded* and fifteen *missing in action*.



(Right above: *This is the area of the Steenbeek – the stream runs close to the line of trees - and is therefore near to where the Newfoundland Battalion fought the engagement of August 16, 1917. It is some eight kilometres distant from a village called Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *Soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)



On that August 16 of 1917, Second Lieutenant Tobin was present at the engagement at the *Steenbeek*, Belgium, being an officer of 'A' Company – on the right side of the attack in the third and fourth waves to take its objective.

Excerpt from the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, War Diary entry for August 16, 1917: *...The attack in which several Corps took part started at 4.45 am just as it was getting light. The troops followed a creeping barrage & both objectives were successfully taken. A large number of Germans were killed at the 1st Objective, and 2 at the 2nd Objective.*

Both objectives were immediately consolidated by digging trenches. The ground over which the Batt'n attacked was a mass of shell holes and for the 2nd Objective both Coys had to cross a swamp.

The Batt'n was relieved during the night 16/17...

After a month-long pause during the month of September – this the only consistently dry period during the entire battle – the struggle continued. On October 9 there was a further general offensive, less successful than the one in August: the casualty count was greater and German counter-attacks regained many of the gains of the day.

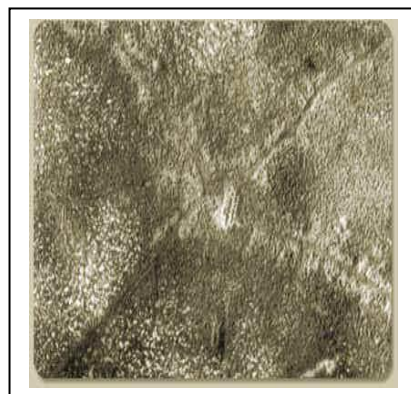
While Second Lieutenant Tobin's presence is recorded at the former confrontation, this is not so in the case of the *Broembeek*.

It was to be only two days after this last-mentioned confrontation that the 1st Battalion then marched to the railway station at Elverdinghe, from there to be transported to *Swindon Camp* in the area of Proven. Having remained there for five days to be both re-enforced and bombed, on the morning of October 17 the unit was once more to board a train.

(Right below: *The once-village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

By ten-thirty that same evening, the Battalion had arrived just to the west of the city of Arras and would now march the final few kilometres to its billets in the rural community of Berles-au-Bois.

The Newfoundlanders were still there, at Berles-au-Bois, four weeks and two days later when, on November 17, the 1st Battalion would be ordered once again onto a train, on this occasion to travel in a south-easterly direction to the town of Peronne. From there it was to begin to move further eastward, now on foot, towards the theatre of the battle now imminent.



On November 19, while still on the move, the unit was issued as it went with... *war stores, rations and equipment*. For much of that night it marched up to the assembly areas from where, at twenty minutes past six on that morning of November 20 – *Zero Hour* – the Newfoundland unit, not being in the first wave of the attack, was to move forward into its forming-up area. From those forward position, some hours later, at ten minutes past ten, bugles blowing, the Newfoundland Battalion advanced to the fray.

This new offensive – apparently initially conceived to be no more than a large-scale raid - the so-called *Battle of Cambrai*, was to officially last for just two weeks and a day, from November 20 until December 4, the Newfoundlanders to be directly involved at all times during that period.

The battle was to begin well for the British who would use tanks on a large scale for the first time, but opportunities were to be squandered. There were to be no troops available to exploit what was, admittedly, a hoped-for yet unexpected success, and by the close of the battle, the Germans had counter-attacked and the British had relinquished as much – more in places - territory as they had originally gained.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *The Canal St-Quentin at Masnières, the crossing of which and the establishment of a bridgehead were the first objectives for the Newfoundlanders on November 20, the first day of the Battle of Cambrai – photograph from 2009*)

The Newfoundland Battalion had once again been dealt with severely, in the vicinity of Marcoing, Masnières - where a Caribou stands today - and in the area of the Canal St-Quentin, a waterway which flows through both places: of the total of five-hundred fifty-three officers and men who had advanced into battle on November 20, two-hundred forty-eight, just fewer than fifty per cent, had become casualties by the end of only the second day*.



(Right above: *The Caribou at Masnières stands on the high ground to the north of the community. The seizure of this terrain was the final objective of the 1st Battalion on November 20; however, whether its capture was ever achieved is at best controversial. – photograph from 2012*)

**At five-hundred fifty-three all ranks – not counting the aforementioned ten per cent reserve - the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment even at the outset of the operation was operating at just over fifty per cent of establishment strength: not that it would have been any consolation had it been known, but a goodly number of battalions in all the British and Dominion forces – with perhaps the exception of the Canadians - were encountering the same problem.*



(Right above: *A number of graves of soldiers from the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment in Marcoing Military Cemetery. Here, as is almost always the case elsewhere, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, has identified them as being Canadian. – photograph from 2010*)

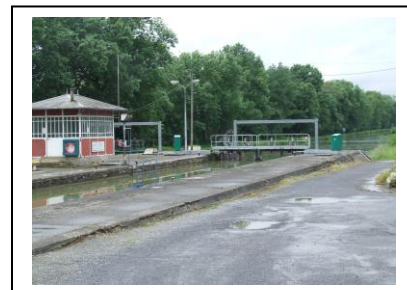
On November 20, Second Lieutenant Tobin was serving with 'A' Company whose primary role of that day was to spearhead the Newfoundland Battalion's advance and to force a crossing of the St. Quentin Canal in order to establish a foothold on the northern bank.

The son of David F. Tobin, former draper's clerk deceased May 1, 1907, and of Alice Mary Tobin (née Cox)* – to whom he had willed his all – she of 97, Circuit Street, Roxbury, Massachusetts, U.S.A., he was also brother of Walter-Albert* - his and Walter's address cited as 114, Duckworth Street in St. John's – Arthur and Mabel.

**The couple married February 2, 1891; she later re-married to Joseph E. Tompkins May 14, 1915, in the United States.*

Second Lieutenant Tobin was reported as having been *killed in action* on November 20, 1917, while serving with 'A' Company on the first day of fighting during the *Battle of Cambrai*, in the attack and capture of the bridge at the western lock over the *Canal St. Quentin* at Masnières.

(Right: *The area of the lock and foot-bridge over the St-Quentin Canal, the scene of fierce fighting during the Battle of Cambrai – photograph from 2010*)



Originally buried in Marcoing Copse Cemetery by the Reverend Thomas Nangle, Battalion Chaplain – in ground that by the end of the *Battle of Cambrai* was reportedly back in enemy hands - his remains were later moved to where they repose today.

James John Tobin had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, June 1, 1893 (from the St. John's Birth Register).



**Corporal Walter Albert Tobin (Regimental Number 1556) was wounded at both Beaumont-Hamel and Monchy-le-Preux. After convalescence he was discharged from the Regiment on June 14, 1918, deemed unfit.*

(The photograph at right of Private Tobin is from the Provincial Archives.)

Second Lieutenant James John Tobin 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).



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 10, 2023.