



Private Hemnon (although it appears that his name may well have been *Herman*) Vail (Regimental Number 5282) is buried in the General Protestant Cemetery in St. John's, Newfoundland, in the Naval and Military Plot.

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of both fisherman and railway-section man, Hemnon Vail presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury** in St. John's on May 12, 1918**. It was a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

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

*****This was the month during which the Newfoundland Military Service Act (conscription) came into effect. From May 11 through until the end of the Great War, the (Newfoundland) Department of Militia called a total of 1,470 men into service. However, there appears to be nothing among Private Vail's papers to suggest that he had been one of those conscripted.***

It was to be on the day of that medical assessment, May 12, while at the same venue, that Hemnon Vail would enlist. He was thus engaged...*for the duration of the war...at the daily private soldier's rate of a single dollar to which was to be appended a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.**

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

Only some few hours were now to follow before there subsequently came to pass, while still at the *CLB Armoury* on Harvey Road, the final formality of his enlistment: attestation. On the same twelfth day of that month of May, 1918, he pledged his allegiance to the reigning monarch, George V, whereupon, at that moment, Hemnon Vail became...*a soldier of the King.*

He then began a waiting period of just a single day more than ten weeks before he was to depart on *overseas service*. Whereas a number of his fellow recruits were to be granted leave during this time, no such record is to be found among Private Vail's personal documents – although as his declared address was in St. John's, it is not unlikely that he was to spend at least *some* time in the company of his family and friends.

Even if he had done so, his stay at home would not necessarily have been a prolonged one, and thus at the time on his enlistment – and after any period of home leave – Private Vail surely reported to quarters in St. John's, these likely in the St. John's curling rink and the *Prince's Skating Rink* in the eastern end of the city.**

(Right: *This photograph of the Prince's Rink in St. John's with military personnel, apparently attired in uniforms of Great War vintage, on parade is from the Ice Hockey Wiki web-site. There appears to be no further information a propos.)*



(continued)

Private Little embarked for the passage to Halifax, Nova Scotia, on July 22. The Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel** having been wrecked in a winter storm in February of that year, it was on HMS *Columbella*, an armed merchant-cruiser, that his detachment of six officers, five-hundred sixty-five men** and a civilian doctor sailed for overseas service, weighing anchor in St. John's harbour at a quarter to five in the morning of the 23rd***.

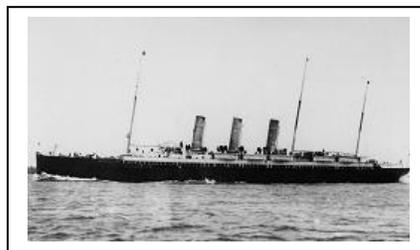
**Apart from carrying the First Five Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment across the ocean to the United Kingdom in October of 1914, 'Florizel' – as she had a commercial route down the Eastern Seaboard from St. John's as far as New York – had since that time transported several drafts as far as Halifax where they had embarked onto other ships for passage to England.*

***Compulsory Military Service, Conscription by another name, had come into force in Newfoundland on May 11 of that 1918, but how many of this draft's personnel were in fact conscripts does not appear to have been recorded.*

****The vessel had arrived in St. John's Harbour on July 19, to tie up at Pitt's Wharf. The following two days were spent loading coal and ammunition, and disembarking three sailors of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve to report to HMS 'Briton' (formerly 'Calypso'). It was not until July 22 that the Newfoundland troops came on board just before seven o'clock in the evening.*

When *Columbella* sailed it was for Halifax where it arrived early in the morning of July 25 and where, during that day and the next, the ship discharged one warrant officer and thirty eight naval personnel as well as one-hundred troops, one officer and a civilian doctor.

Columbella was then to be the only Royal Navy vessel to escort nine other ships across the Atlantic, a convoy which sailed on the afternoon of the morrow. The passage was to be uneventful and in the early afternoon of August 8, she entered the Tilbury Docks on the River Thames. The Newfoundland contingent disembarked at two forty-five on that same afternoon, from there to proceed to *Hazely Down Camp*. – the preceding information from the log of *Columbella*.



(Right above: In February the new Anchor Line vessel 'Columbia' was launched to serve as a passenger-ship and cargo-liner. In November of 1914, some eight years later she was requisitioned by the Admiralty and transformed into His Majesty's Armed Merchant Cruiser 'Columbella' carry eight 4.7-inch guns then an arsenal of eight 6-inch weapons; however, whether she was ever to fire them in anger appears not to have been recorded. The ship survived the conflict and was returned to her owners in June of 1919. – The image of a peace-time Columbia/ Columbella is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

(Right above: The photograph of 'Columbella' is from the NAVAL-HISTORY.NET web-site.)

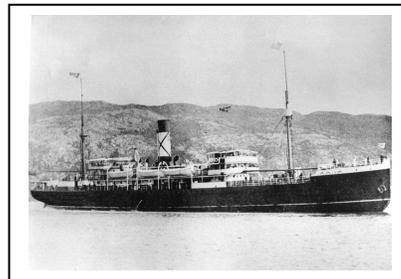
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Some three years and ten months prior to that summer of 1918 when Private Vail was to find himself in southern England, in the late summer and early autumn of 1914 the newly-formed Newfoundland Regiment's first recruits had undergone a period of training of five weeks on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the east end of St. John's and elsewhere in the city, and had been formed into 'A' and 'B' Companies.

During that same period the various authorities on both sides of the ocean had also been preparing for the Regiment's transfer overseas.

(Right: *The image of 'Florizel' at anchor in the harbour at St. John's in October of 1914 is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.*)



This first Newfoundland contingent was to embark on October 3, in some cases only days after a recruit's enlistment and/ or attestation. To become known to history as the *First Five Hundred* and also as the *Blue Puttees*, on that day they had boarded the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting in St. John's Harbour.

The ship had sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island. Once having disembarked 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 it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.

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



Only days after 'A' and 'B' Companies had taken up their posting there, on February 16 of 1915, 'C' Company – the first re-enforcements for the original contingent - would arrive directly – through Liverpool of course - from Newfoundland.

On the final day of the month of March it had been the turn of 'D' Company to arrive – they via Halifax as well as Liverpool – to report...*to duty*...at Edinburgh, and then 'E' Company five weeks less a day later again, on May 4*.



**These five Companies, while a contingent of the Newfoundland Regiment, was not yet a battalion and would not be so for a further five months – as will be seen below.*

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

Seven days after the arrival of 'E' Company in the Scottish capital, on May 11 the entire Newfoundland contingent had been ordered elsewhere. On that day, seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the unit had been dispatched to *Stobs Camp*, under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, close to the town of Hawick.

(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 of Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)



Two months less a day later, on July 10, 'F' Company would march into *Stobs Camp*.

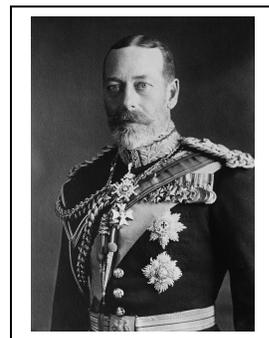
This had been an all-important moment: the Company's arrival was to bring the Newfoundland Regiment's numbers up to some fifteen hundred, establishment strength* of a battalion which could be posted on...active service.



**A number sufficient for four 'fighting' companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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

From *Stobs Camp*, some three weeks after the arrival of 'F' Company, in early August 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', the four senior Companies, having by that time become the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, had been transferred to *Aldershot Camp* in southern England.



There they were to undergo final preparations – and a royal inspection – before the Battalion's departure to the Middle East and to the fighting on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

(Right above: *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 taken from the *Bain News Services* as presented by the *Wikipedia* web-site.)

The later arrivals to the United Kingdom, 'E' and 'F' Companies, were to be posted to the new Regimental Depot and were eventually to form the nucleus of the first re-enforcements to be dispatched to the 1st Battalion.

(Right: *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*)



Ayr was a small town on the west coast of Scotland whose history precedes the year 1205 when it was established as a Royal Burgh (Borough) by the crown of Scotland, an appointment which emphasized the importance of the town as a harbour, market and, later, administrative centre.

By the time of the Great War centuries later it was expanding and the River Ayr which had once marked the northern boundary of the place was now flowing through its centre; a new town to the north (Newton-on-Ayr), its population fast-increasing, perhaps encouraged by the coming of the railway, was soon to be housing the majority of the personnel of the Newfoundland Regimental Depot.



(Right above: 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.

Since that summer of 1915, recruits from Newfoundland had passed through the Regimental Depot at Ayr, there to undergo the mandatory fourteen weeks of training, and had then been sent on their way to active service, a practice which was to continue for the subsequent twenty-nine months.

In all, Ayr and Barry (see below) were to see the coming and going of eleven drafts from home*.

***The last to do so would be the Seventeenth Draft. The first six – ‘A’ to ‘F’ Companies – had already been stationed in the United Kingdom – as seen above - before the establishment of the Regimental facilities at Ayr.**

The Regimental Depot had been established during the summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, and was to eventually serve as the base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion. It was from there – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 – that the new-comers arriving from home were despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of the 1st Battalion.



(Right above: Wellington Square seen here almost a century after it hosted the officers of the Newfoundland Regiment – photograph from 2012)

(Right: The new race-course at Newton-upon-Ayr - opened in 1907 – where the men of the Regiment were sometimes billeted and where they replaced some of the turf with a vegetable garden; part of the present grandstand is original – photograph from 2012)

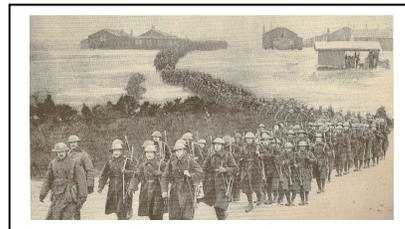


At the outset there had been problems at Ayr to be able to accommodate the number of new arrivals – plus men from other British regiments which were still being billeted in the area...and a measles epidemic which was to claim the life of several Regiment personnel – but by the spring of 1916, things had been satisfactorily settled: the officers were in Wellington Square in the town-centre of Ayr itself, and the *other ranks* had been billeted at Newton Park School and if not, in the grandstand or a tented camp at the newly-built racecourse in the suburb of Newton-upon-Ayr.

During the summer months of 1917, as of early July the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment and the Regimental Depot had been transferred from Ayr to not-so-distant Barry. Initially intended to be a permanent move, the protest from several quarters was such that the Newfoundlanders were back in Ayr by the end of September.

Headquarters of the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the soon-Royal Newfoundland Regiment had moved quarters from the Royal Borough of Ayr in Scotland to southern England, to *Hazely Down Camp* in the southern English county of Hampshire, not far distant from the venerable cathedral city of Winchester.

(Right: *Troops march through a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp at some time during the winter of 1918 1918 – from The War Illustrated*)



This transfer had been finalized during the latter part of January, 1918, and it was *to there, Hazely Down Camp*, that Private Vail was to report upon arrival those several months later in August, in England.

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Excerpt from a medical summary to be issued a propos Private Vail at *Hazely Down Camp* on November 5, 1918: *Since joining Depot he was on parade for one week, when developed mumps. Sent to hospital where he was for 19 days. Since then he has been on parade and doing his best, but is considered unfit for further training.*

* * * * *

Several months previous to the presentation of the above report – but as stated therein - on August 17 Private Vail had been admitted into *Hazely Camp Hospital* for medical attention to a case of the mumps. Although discharged...*to duty...*on September 5, as seen above...*since then he has been on parade and doing his best to carry on, but is considered unfit for further training.* With this consideration in mind, he was thus allotted only light tasks.

On November 5 he was further diagnosed as suffering from debility and was thereupon recommended for repatriation to Newfoundland. A week later Private Vail was embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Tunisian* as a soldier of the 79th Repatriation Draft, with many of those travelling being personnel of the Newfoundland Forestry Corps, and sailed from the Tilbury Docks, London, for Saint John, New Brunswick, where the ship arrived on November 23.

(Right below: *The image of 'Tunisian' in her Allan-Line livery is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Private Vail was then to set foot in St. John's on the 28th, five days later, and to report to the Regimental Headquarters on the following day. Having then appeared before a medical board on December 2, he was discharged and ordered sent to the *Jensen Camp* for tubercular patients on Blackmarsh Road in the outskirts of the capital city where he was admitted on the 4th of December.



During the intervening days he had boarded at the family residence on Hayward Avenue in the city.

On December 19-20, only weeks later again, he was discharged from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as being...*unfit for further military service.*

The son of George Vail, fisherman, and of Susannah Vail (née *Lewis** of Grates Cove) and the step-son of Agnes Vail** – to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay - of 25, Hayward Avenue in St. John's at the time of his enlistment – he also was, or was to be, step-brother to Frank, Eliza, Violet and Irene. He had five siblings from the marriage of George and Susannah: Jabez, Betsy-Lavinia, Mary-Gladys, Maggie-Jane and Ethel-Sarah – much of this family information has been found in *The Gowdy Family in Canada web-site.*

**The couple had married on December 19, of 1893.*

Private Vail was reported as having...*died of sickness...*on July 7, 1919. He was never to return to Grates Cove where he had declared his intention to settle after his discharge from the Army.

Hemnon Vail had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-one years: date of birth at Lower Island Cove in the District of Bay de Verde, Newfoundland, August 8, 1896 (from the Newfoundland Vital Statistics in which his given name is found as *Eaman* – a second source has *Elman* (sic)).

***Susannah Vail of Lower Island Cove passed away of consumption on February 11, 1906 at Grates Cove. The second wife of George Vail was spinster Agnes Good whom he married in his home on Fleming Street in the city on January 4 of 1908 – they had parented four offspring by the time of the 1921 Census..*



Private Hemnon Vail was entitled to the British War Medal for his *overseas service.*

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to *criceadam@yahoo.ca.* Last updated – January 30, 2023.