



Private Willis White (Regimental Number 739), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

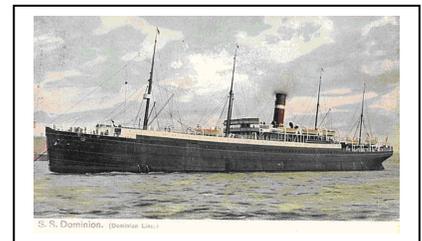


His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a worker in the lumbering industry and earning three-hundred fifty dollars per annum, Willis White presented himself for medical examination in the central Newfoundland community of Millertown on December 14, 1914, a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*. He was a recruit of the Second Draft.

Four days later, having during that time travelled by train to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, Willis White 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 18.

Now for Private White, Number 739, there was to be a seven-week waiting period before there came a summons to *overseas service*. While he may well have returned for the Christmas and New Year period back to Millertown or home to Comfort Cove, his papers record neither that nor the date on which he reported again to St. John's. It is possible that he arrived several days or even weeks in advance of his departure – as did a goodly number of those recruits from further afield. If so, he likely boarded in the city, his expenses defrayed by the public purse.

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 White thus departed Newfoundland for *overseas service* - a day later again, on February 5, for trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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: *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.

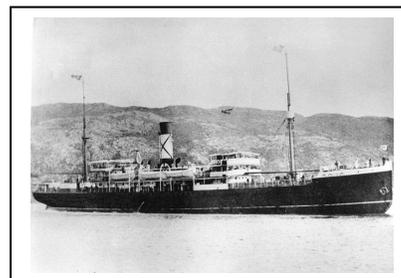
Private White and the other new-comers reported to duty at Edinburgh Castle on February 16.



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

\* \* \* \* \*

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.



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

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.



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

The ship would sail for the United Kingdom on the morrow, October 4, 1914, to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.

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 White, as also cited beforehand, would arrive from Newfoundland on February 16 of 1915.

\* \* \* \* \*

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 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)

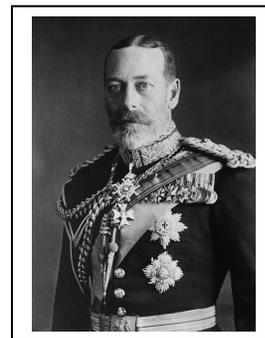


*\*This was approximately fifteen hundred, sufficient to furnish two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.*

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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

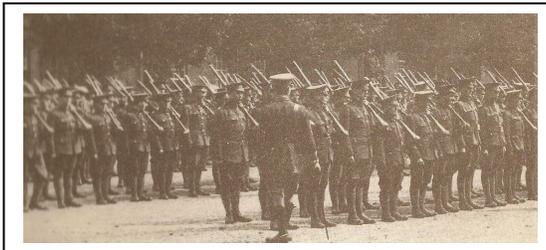
Meanwhile the two junior Companies, ‘E’ – last arrived at Edinburgh - and the aforementioned ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion.

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



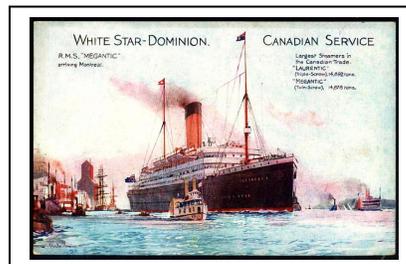
It was during this period at Aldershot, on August 15, that Private White was prevailed upon to re-enlist, on this occasion for the *duration of the war*\*.

*\*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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 White 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion landed at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

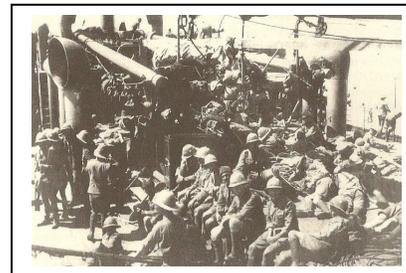


(Right above: *The image of Megantic, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

(Right: *Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is to be seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a landing-craft are still clearly visible in the foreground on 'A' Beach. – photograph taken in 2011)*



(Right: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: either Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives)*



(Right: *A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was to serve during the autumn of 1915 – photograph from 2011)*



(continued)

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: *No-Man's-Land at Suvla Bay as seen from the Newfoundland positions – from Provincial Archives*)

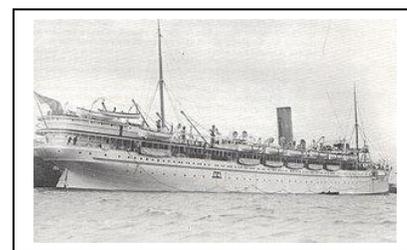
(Right: *An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from Provincial Archives*)



*\*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.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Some seven weeks after having set foot on the sand and rock – mostly the latter – of Kangaroo Beach, on November 9 Private White was evacuated through the 26<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at *Suvla Bay* onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Rewa* suffering from jaundice and was then transported to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria. From there he was subsequently forwarded on to Cairo where he was admitted into the *Nasereih Schools* Hospital on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of that same November.

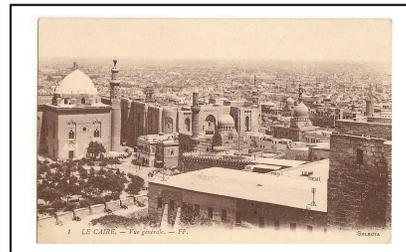


(Right above: *The photograph of a peace-time Rewa on the preceding page is from the Wikipedia website. The vessel was built during the years 1905 and 1906 as a passenger vessel on routes between India and Great Britain and, as with many other ships, was to be requisitioned during the Great War at first as a troopship and then as a hospital ship. It was while she was playing this latter role that on January 4, 1918, while en route from Malta to Great Britain, she was torpedoed by a German U-boat and was sunk. Fortunately she foundered slowly, thus allowing all the two-hundred seventy-nine wounded on board to be taken off. Rewa's crew, with the exception of two, were also all to escape.*)

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

On December 13, one month after his hospitalization, Private White was discharged from hospital in Cairo to duty at the British Base Depot – at Sidi Bishr, Alexandria - and, seven weeks later again, would re-join the Newfoundland Battalion, by then in Egypt after the withdrawal of Allied forces from the Gallipoli Peninsula. He and the parent unit were re-united on January 31, 1916, at Port Suez, at the southern end of the Canal.



\* \* \* \* \*

During the short period which had now followed Private White's departure for medical attention on November 9, things were to worsen at Gallipoli\* for the British in general and for the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 had been 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, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

At Suvla Bay, the British positions were daily becoming more and more untenable and thus on the night of December 19-20, the area was totally abandoned – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.

Some of the Battalion personnel were to be evacuated to the nearby island of Imbros, some to Lemnos, further away; but in neither case had the respite been of a long duration; the 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)



(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* – had by then only been marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

This final operation 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.

*\*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 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 15<sup>th</sup> of that month. The Newfoundlanders had then immediately been 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 29<sup>th</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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: 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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)*



Suez, as seen in an above paragraph, was to be where Private White had then returned after twelve weeks less a day's absence from his unit. He was also to remain there in Egypt after the Newfoundland Battalion had left in mid-March for duty in Europe on the Western Front.

He was once more to be in need of medical care.

Private White was admitted into into the 18<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital at Suez, on March 10 or 11, the diagnosis on this occasion being a venereal problem, and there he was at first considered to be *seriously ill*. After treatment he was discharged *to duty* at the Sidi Bishr Base Depot on April 8, only to be then admitted into the 17<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in the city just three days afterwards, on April 11 – a second source suggests that it was on April 7.



(Right above: *One of the main thoroughfares in the Egyptian city of Alexandria – la rue de la Gare de Rameleh - at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

It was while Private White was receiving medical attention in Alexandria that a decision had been made about the stationing of the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division in which the Newfoundland unit was serving: the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had thus been ordered on its way to France.

Meanwhile, Private White remained in hospital until being released on May 25, to presumably be thereupon temporarily posted once more to the Base Depot in Alexandria before embarking on May 30 for the French port of Marseilles.

He arrived and disembarked there on June 6.

Private White was with the Newfoundland Battalion again on or about June 20, although his – or anybody else's – arrival at that time is not to be found recorded in the Battalion War Diary. By what itinerary he travelled to report is not documented, although via the 29<sup>th</sup> Divisional Base Depot in the vicinity of the Norman city of Rouen is a likely suggestion; from there he re-joined his Battalion in the village of Mailly-Maillet where the support units were billeted at that time.

\* \* \* \* \*

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

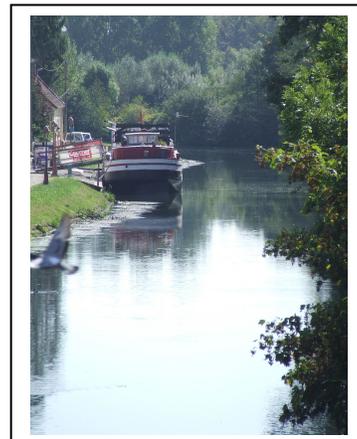
Having de-trained at the local station at two o'clock in the morning, the Newfoundlanders were now still to endure the long, dark march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

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

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

On April 13, the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 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' – had taken over several support positions from a British unit\* before the entire Newfoundland unit had then been 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 meandering river, *the Somme*, that flowed – and does so today – through the region.

And as seen above, it was here, in the village of Mailly-Maillet, that Private White had reported back to service with the Newfoundland Battalion – at a time when battle was imminent.



At or about this time the Newfoundlanders were serving in the trenches in tandem with the Border Regiment, retiring for the final time on June 23 to Louvencourt. The next time that they took up post in the British lines it would be on the evening of June 30.

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

\* \* \* \* \*

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*.

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.*



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



The grand-son of Charles S. White, lumberman – to whom he had willed all his possessions as well as a daily sixty-cent allotment from his pay - and the son of Sarah White (by the time of enlistment she was *Mrs. Sarah White Rose\**, having remarried), of Comfort Cove, Notre Dame Bay.

*\*Married to John Rose on November 9, 1897?*

Private White was at first reported as *missing in action*, on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'B' Company – also reported to have been of 'D' Company - during the fighting of the first day of *First Somme*.

However, a subsequent report submitted by the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment, and dated 21/10/16, recorded his identification and burial on that date. His file was thus amended so as to read *killed in action 1/7/16*. At home, it was the Reverend Stenlake\* of Lewisporte who was requested to bear this further news to his family.

*\*Originally it had been a Reverend J. Wilson who had been so requested, but he was about to be replaced at Comfort Cove by the Reverend Stenlake.*

Willis White had enlisted at a *declared* nineteen years of age.

Private Willis White 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 8, 2023.