



Captain* Augustus O'Brien lies in Heilly Station Cemetery, Méricourt l'Abbé – Grave reference IV. B. 82.

****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.***

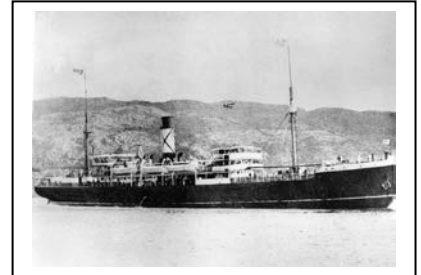
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And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist ‘for the duration’, even though, at the beginning, as a private, they had volunteered their services for only a limited time – twelve months.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of *Manager with Garrett Byrne, Bookseller and Stationer* – he was also a member of the *Knights of Columbus* - Augustus O’ Brien was granted an (temporary) Imperial Commission* and an accompanying appointment to the rank of captain on September 21, 1914, by the Governor of the Dominion of Newfoundland – who was also Commanding Officer of the Newfoundland Regiment – Lieutenant Colonel Sir Walter E. Davidson.

**This particular Commission – in the case of Captain O’Brien dated September 21 of 1914 - was limited in its scope in that it was...‘to carry rank on service within the Colony and during the conveyance of troops on the high seas.’ It was surely amended on some future yet unrecorded date.*

October 3, 1914, was the day on which Captain O’Brien and the first Newfoundland contingent, to become known to history as both the *First Five Hundred* and the *Blue Puttees* – the unit was not yet a battalion - embarked for overseas service onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Florizel* awaiting in St. John’s Harbour.



(Right above: 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, to thereupon rendezvous off the south coast of the Island with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas.



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

In the United Kingdom Captain O’Brien 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: Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011)

Captain O’Brien was then to make the return journey across the Atlantic in March of that year of 1915 – but only as far as Nova Scotia. In Liverpool on March 6 he took passage on the requisitioned *Allan Line* vessel *Corsican* as far as Halifax, to arrive there ten days later.

There he was to await the arrival of 'D' Company on March 20 or 21, from Newfoundland on board *Stephano*, sister ship of *Florizel*.

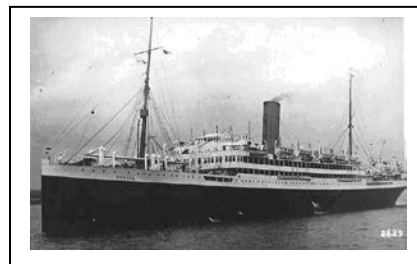
Captain O'Brien and 'D' Company were then to take ship on March 22 to be transported across the Atlantic and to Liverpool on board HMS *Orduña*, an ocean-going passenger-liner requisitioned by that time as an armed merchant cruiser and sometime troop transport.

(Right: *The photograph of 'Stephano' sailing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)



Upon arrival on March 30 in the United Kingdom, 'D' Company entrained for the journey north to the Scottish capital city of Edinburgh which was reached late on that same day. 'A', 'B' and 'C' Companies were there to welcome them as the Newfoundland Regiment had by that time been posted to garrison the city's venerable Castle.

(Right: *The recently-built Orduña – constructed 1n 1913-1914 - was requisitioned during the Great War for use as an armed merchant cruiser and also as a troop transport. Involved with the unfortunate Jewish refugees in the 'Voyage of the Damned' affair, the vessel was later also to be used as a troopship and an evacuation transport during the conflict of 1939-1945 before being finally laid up in 1950. – photograph from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*



On May 11, by then comprising 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D' and 'E' Companies, the entire Newfoundland contingent was transferred to a tented *Stobs Camp*, to the south-east of Edinburgh and in the vicinity of the Scottish town of Hawick, where it was to undergo further training and exercises for three months.

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment on parade at Stobs Camp and about to be presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915 – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)*

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)*



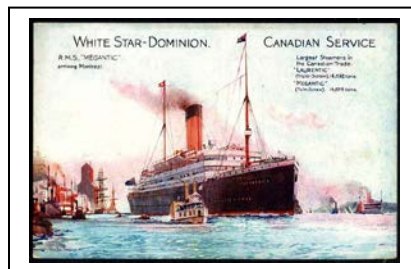
****On July 10, 1915, 'F' Company had arrived at 'Stobs Camp' from Newfoundland, its personnel raising the numbers of the unit to battalion establishment strength, and thus enabling it to be ordered on active service.***

At this same time, those four senior companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, having become its 1st Battalion, had been attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and were now to be despatched on active service.



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

On August 20, 1915, the Newfoundland unit had 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 had landed at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



Captain O'Brien stepped onto the sand and rocks of *Suvla Bay* as Second-in-Command of 'D' Company. Almost eleven weeks later, on December 3, he was appointed to the command of 'A' Company.



(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 adjacent: *Kangaroo Beach, where the personnel of the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a British landing-craft are 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 the Provincial Archives)*

(continued)

(Right: A century later, the area - little changed from those far-off days - of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where Captain O'Brien served during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)



When the Newfoundlanders had landed from their transport ship at Suvla Bay on that night of September 19-20 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 were 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 below: 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.**



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 strike the Suvla Bay area and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival rather than the enemy was to be the priority.

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

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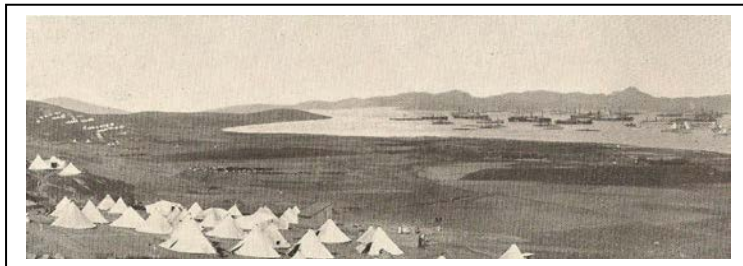
Three weeks and a day after the cataclysmic storm, Captain O'Brien was evacuated from Suvla Bay in the late evening of December 18, in charge of the first party of one-hundred men to lead the now-commencing abandonment of the place. The detachment was to travel overnight to arrive at Mudros on the Greek island of Lemnos on the morrow, December 19.



Only a day later again he was admitted on December 20* into the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital at West Mudros. Captain O'Brien was reportedly by then suffering from jaundice.

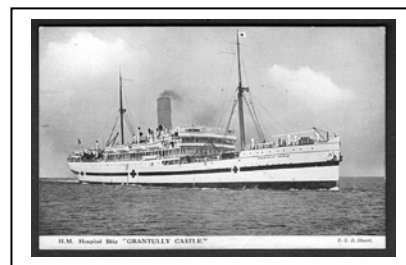
**No Canadian troops were to serve in the Gallipoli Campaign, the 3rd Stationary Hospital being perhaps the only Canadian presence in the eastern Mediterranean during this period. The hospital's matron and a nursing sister also lie in Portianos Cemetery, victims of dysentery.*

(Right above: 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)



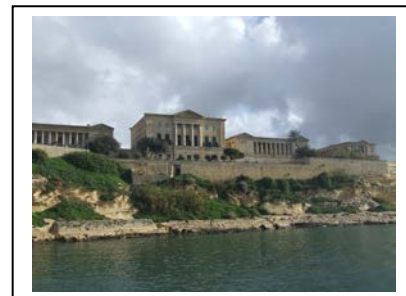
(Right: Allied medical facilities such as those in the foreground and further behind – the majority of them under canvas - almost entirely surround a congested Mudros Bay and its minuscule harbour during the autumn of 1915. – from Illustration)

(Right: The photograph of HMHS Grantully Castle clad in her war-time garb, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)



A month and a day later, on January 21 of the New Year, 1916, Captain O'Brien was evacuated further afield, on His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Grantully Castle*, to the British-held Mediterranean island possession of Malta, there to receive further treatment.

(Right below: A former Royal Naval Hospital now in disuse on Malta: There were many such facilities on the island – independent from Great Britain since 1964 – which served during both world wars. – photograph from 2011)



On February 13 of the New Year, 1916, Captain O'Brien was taken on board His Majesty's Transport *Simla*, to be transferred from Malta to Egypt and to the Mustapha Convalescent Camp just outside Alexandria. From there he re-joined the Newfoundland Battalion in the vicinity of the port-town of Suez on March 7.

When he reported back *to duty* it was to be only a single week before his 1st Battalion would leave Egypt, the Newfoundlanders having by that time been returned from Gallipoli for almost two months.

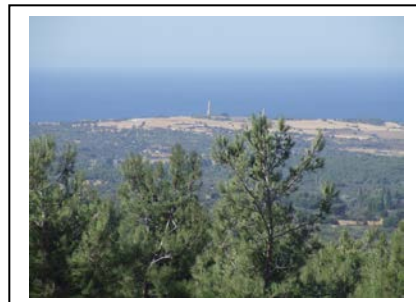
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On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard.

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

(Right: *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 *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at *Gallipoli* – had now only been marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.

This final operation would take 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*.



(Right above: *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*)

(continued)

(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 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.

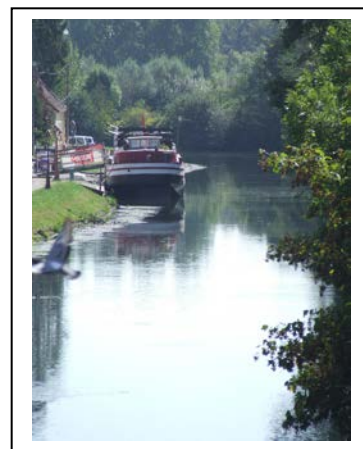
(Right below: *A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010*)

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 reinforcements from *Scotland* via *Rouen* and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

Just days following the Newfoundland Battalion's arrival on the *Western Front*, two of the four Companies – 'A', and 'B' – were to take over several support positions from a British unit* before the entire Newfoundland unit was 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.*

(continued)



(Right below: *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.*



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

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



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

(continued)

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...?)

Although having been on the nominal roll of the 1st Battalion on July 1, 1916, Captain O’Brien was not to figure in the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel on that first day of *the Somme*, quite possibly having been one of the ten per cent reserve of fourteen officers and eighty-three other ranks held back at Louvencourt on the day. This force was sent forward late in the day of July 1 to Beaumont-Hamel, arriving when most of the fighting had abated.



****These men answered a roll call of the following day as did those who had fought the battle and survived it unscathed. Where the documentation shows ‘with Battalion’ on July 4, this is the date on which the roll calls of July 2 were eventually officially recorded.***

(Right above: British assault trenches in front of the main lines in the field at Beaumont-Hamel. – photograph from 2007(?))

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 Mailly-Maillet.

(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)

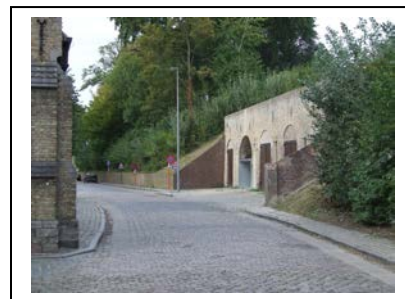
There on July 11, a draft of one-hundred twenty-seven re-enforcements – a second source cites one-hundred thirty – had reported *to duty*. They had been the first to arrive following the events at Beaumont-Hamel but even with this additional man-power having arrived, the

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.

When out of the line the Newfoundlanders were billeted in the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres itself*, where on one occasion when 'D' Company hosted a dinner, Captain O'Brien apparently proved to be a formidable after-dinner speaker.

**'D' Company was in the ruins of an old mill just outside the eastern ramparts and the Menin Gate.*



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 above: *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 above: *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*)

Since he was the Officer Commanding 'A' Company which was to lead the attack on the left, Captain O'Brien was almost inevitably to become a casualty. He incurred wounds to the stomach soon after the launch of the assault and was subsequently evacuated from the field.

(Right: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card*)



The adopted son – his original name *Collins* - of Thomas O'Brien and of Bridget O'Brien – to whom he had allocated a daily dollar and twenty-five cents from his three dollar per diem captain's pay - of 28 1/2, Lime Street - this his own address (and property) - in the city of St. John's, he was also brother to Peter Collins and Minnie Collins.

Captain O'Brien was reported as having *died of wounds* on October 18, 1916, in the 36th Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly.

He died at thirty-six years of age.

For a while it seemed as though the name of Captain O'Brien would be added to those who have no last known resting-place: *...With reference to the attached location sheet giving the name of the officer who was buried at a point South of Albert, I beg to inform you that when the grave was opened for the purpose of concentration to another Cemetery, no trace of the body could be found.*

Therefore a Memorial Cross has been erected to his memory at Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension, South of Albert. (From a memorandum dated December 6, 1919, received by the Newfoundland Pay & Records Office in London from the War Graves Registration Department.

It was perhaps due to the memory of Major Nangle, Chaplain of the Forces to the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, that the grave was finally identified: *'I remember where he is buried more vividly than any other officer...4th grave...about 3^d plot, 2nd row on the east side of the British Military Cemetery (of Heilly Station) on the Corbie-Méricourt Rd., opposite where the 36th and 38th CCS stood.'* – Nangle (Major) (4/2/20) - from Regimental records



(Right above: *Heilly Station, the photo taken from the entrance to Heilly Station Cemetery – photograph from 2010*)

Captain O'Brien was posthumously *Mentioned in Dispatches* by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig in January of 1917 - *Has shown conspicuous devotion to duty in command of a company for over a year.* - London Gazette, January 4th, 1917

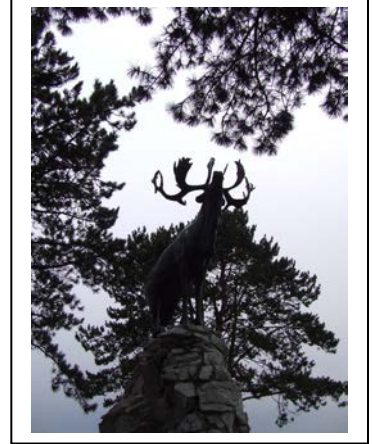


(Right: *The Caribou at Gueudecourt stands on the site of the furthest point of advance of the Newfoundland Battalion on October 12, 1916. – photograph from 2010*)



(The photograph at right of Captain O'Brien is from the Provincial Archives.)

(Right below: *A memorial in Mount Carmel Cemetery in St. John's, erected by his adoptive parents, Thomas and Bridget O'Brien, commemorates the sacrifice of Captain O'Brien. – photograph from 2015*)



Captain Augustus O'Brien 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).



Sir P. G.(?) McGrath
City

May 18th, 1918

Dear Sir.

You must excuse me for writing these few lines. I thought that you might be after forgetting me, would you be kind enough to send me my son's back money or whatever it is that you are going to send me: the money of the late Capt Augustus O'Brien. Would you kindly send it up this week as I need it, hoping that I will not have to send any more.

yours truly
Mrs. Thos O'Brien
28 Lime Street
City

