



Second Lieutenant Wilfrid Douglas Ayre (Regimental Number 164*) lies in Knightsbridge Cemetery: Grave reference B. 10.

****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.***

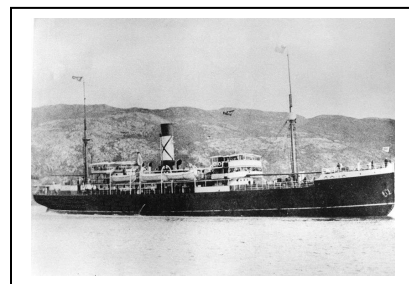
And since officers did not enlist, they were not then required to re-enlist 'for the duration', even though, at the beginning, as a private, each had volunteered his services for only a limited time – twelve months.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as being that of an employee of the family firm of *Ayre & Sons Ltd.* of Water Street, St. John's, Wilfrid Douglas Ayre was a recruit of the First Draft.

Having presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road, in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on August 31 of 1914, Wilfrid Douglas Ayre then enlisted more than two weeks later, on September 16 – engaged at the daily private soldier's rate of a single daily dollar, plus a ten-cent per diem Field Allowance.

There appears to be no record of when he was appointed to the rank of corporal of 'B' Company, but it may have been soon afterwards, perhaps on September 21 – while the recruits were undergoing several weeks of training on the shores of Quidi Vidi Lake in the east end of the city, as there were several such promotions made on that date*.

Likely attesting on one of the first three days of October when a goodly number of the new soldiers apparently were to do so – another source says September 16, the day of his enlistment – Corporal Ayre was further promoted, to the rank of sergeant, on October 3. On that same day, as a non-commissioned officer of the *First Five Hundred* – also to become known as the *Blue Puttees* – he embarked onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* awaiting the contingent in St. John's Harbour.



The ship would sail for the United Kingdom on the following day, October 4, via its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the 1st Canadian Division overseas, off the south coast of the Island.

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

(Right: *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 Sergeant Ayre trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; then at Edinburgh Castle – where it was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles – and where he was to be hospitalized twice for treatment for a venereal problem.



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

On May 11 the Newfoundlanders were transferred 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.

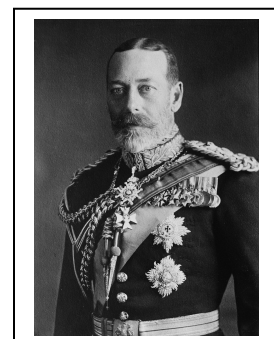
And it was while there at *Stobs Camp* that Sergeant Ayre was appointed to the post of Company Quarter Master Sergeant on July 12.

(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, the later-arrived ‘E’ and ‘F’*, to be accompanied by Company Quarter Master Sergeant Ayre, 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.*

(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.* – courtesy of the *Carnegie Library at Ayr*)



Following this summer of 1916, the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland’s west coast was now to serve as the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment from where – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts from home were to be despatched to bolster the 1st Battalion’s numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.



(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)

(continued)

It was during this period at Ayr that Company Quarter Master Sergeant Ayre was granted an Imperial Commission and the accompanying appointment to the rank of second lieutenant on October 16. This promotion, however, was not the harbinger of *active service*: Second Lieutenant Ayre was to spend a further five months in Scotland, until March of the following year, before he was to be ordered to the Middle East – only to end up in France.

The 2nd Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr embarked in the English south-coast naval facility of Devonport – where Sergeant Ayre had landed some seventeen months previously - and sailed on March 13 for the Middle East. It seems to have been still unclear at the time what the 29th Division's – and thus the 1st Newfoundland Battalion's – future theatre of war was to be.

It may have been that their ship lacked radio, or even possibly that *certain* of the other personnel on board were indeed required for duties in the Middle East, for it was in Egypt that Second Lieutenant Ayre and the other Newfoundlanders were briefly to find themselves. They were soon to board His Majesty's Transport *Kingstonian* for the return Mediterranean journey to the French port of Marseilles*.



En route to Egypt their ship travelling eastward had passed *Alaunia* which was carrying the 1st Battalion westward from Suez to Marseilles.

(Right above: *British troops march through the port area of the French city of Marseilles.* – from a vintage post-card)

The officers and men of the 2nd Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr disembarked in France on April 4, three weeks and a day after leaving Devonport. Most of the personnel now entrained immediately for the journey north to rendezvous with the parent unit. The reunion occurred on March 8 while the 1st Battalion – itself, of course, only recently arrived from Egypt – was billeted in the community of Louvencourt and still on the march towards its destination near the front.

Second Lieutenant Ayre, however, had at the time been posted elsewhere, possibly to the British Expeditionary Force Base Depot in the vicinity of the city of Rouen*.

It was not until May 5 that he would report *to duty* with the 1st Battalion - when he did so it was as an officer commanding a draft of thirty-two *other ranks*. It was at a time when the 1st Battalion was enjoying a tour in the trenches near to the village of Mailly-Maillet, a village where the Newfoundlanders were occasionally billeted during the short periods when they were relieved from duty in the lines.



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

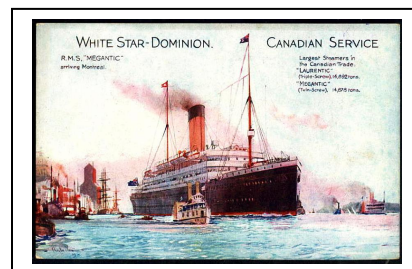
*****Perhaps even left behind at Alexandria due to a lack of officers there as suggested in Lieutenant Owen Steele's Diary. Steele reports that four officers – Keegan, C. Rendell, Robertson and W. Ayre – ‘...went to Marseilles...but had been kept by the Base in Alexandria’...which unfortunately makes little sense. Was the Base in question either Marseilles itself or the one at Rouen?***

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At this time, during those few months of Sergeant (later Second Lieutenant) Ayre's posting to Ayr, the four senior companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, having become the 1st Battalion, had thereupon been attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and had been despatched to 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 – 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 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*.



(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 above: *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 above: *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*)

(continued)

(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 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:

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 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, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

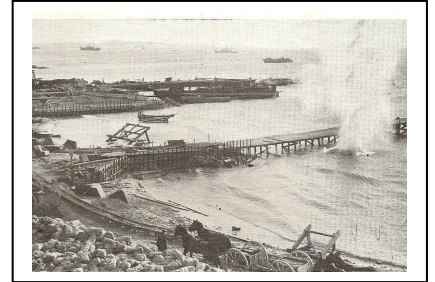
On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard. Some of the Battalion personnel had been evacuated to the nearby island of *Imbros*, some to *Lemnos*, further away, but 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 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.

(Right: ‘*W*’ Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – from *Illustration*)



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.

**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 – with General Maude - to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.*



(Right above: ‘*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)

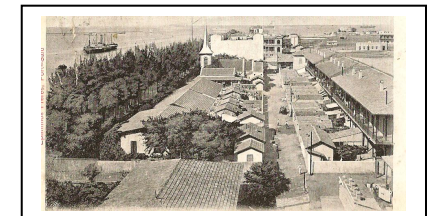
Immediately after the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of Alexandria, arriving there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to the 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*.



**Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.*

(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*)

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.



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

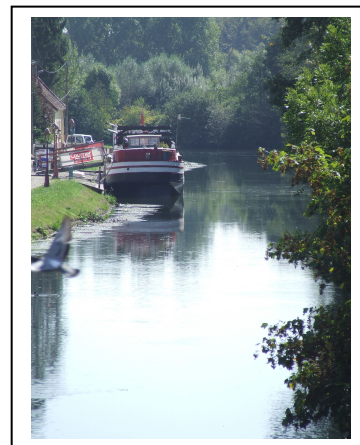
Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably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

(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 after the completion of their first tour in the trenches to the areas of Maily-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing – this to include the construction of a light railway in the Louvencourt area - for the now-impending British campaign of that summer, this to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, flowing sedately – and still does so today – through the region on its journey to the sea.

As seen in an earlier paragraph, it had been during this period, at a time during which the Newfoundland Battalion had been billeted at Mailly-Maillet, that Second Lieutenant Ayre had reported *to duty*.

* * * * *

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 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)*

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.



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

The son of Charles Pasco(e) Ayre, managing director of *Ayre & Sons Ltd.*, and of Diana Agnes Ayre (née *Stevenson*)* of *Burn Brae*, Waterford Bridge Road in St. John's, he was also brother to Charles, to Dorothy and to Ronald.

**The couple was married in Scotland of July 9, 1888.*

Second Lieutenant Ayre was at first reported as *missing in action* on July 1, 1916, while serving with the Number 14 Platoon, 'D' Company, during the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel on the first day of *the Somme*.

However, he was later confirmed as having been *killed in action* by Sergeant Phelan (see further below) and his personal record was thus amended to read as such. By then he had already been buried, on that July 1, by a Reverend H. S. Reid attached to the 87th Brigade.

Wilfrid Douglas Ayre had enlisted at a *declared* twenty years of age: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, July 15, 1895 (from the St. John's Register of Births).



Three of his cousins also died on July 1: Lieutenant Gerald W. Ayre, Newfoundland Regiment, No. 869; Captain Eric S. Ayre, Newfoundland Regiment; and Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre (brother of Eric), the Norfolk Regiment*.

(Lieutenant Ayre's photograph is from the Provincial Archives.)

Second Lieutenant Wilfrid Douglas Ayre was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



**See elsewhere in these files.*

I saw 2nd Lieut. Wilfred Ayre fall in front of me. I should say it was about one hundred yards from our line. I thought he must have been killed, because he never spoke another word to me. I then took charge of the Platoon, No. 14, D. Co.

Statement made by: 1513 Sgt. W. F. Phelan*

**Record Office
28th Aug. 1916**

(continued)

****Sergeant Phelan has made the same mistake as many other people – including the author – when he spells the name ‘Wilfred’. In fact, the correct spelling is...Wilfrid***

The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Mrs. Rosemary Ayre and of Mrs. Kathleen Knowling in correcting the above-cited error and also others which were to be found in the original biographies.

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 11, 2023.