



Private John Nicholas Cleary (Regimental Number 288) is interred in Ancre British Cemetery: Grave reference II. C. 46.

His occupation previous to enlistment recorded as that of a longshoreman and labourer working for a weekly wage of ten dollars, John Cleary presented himself for medical examination at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on September 1, 1914. It was a procedure which was to find him...*fit for foreign service.*

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He then enlisted a week later, on September 8 – engaged at the daily private soldier’s rate of \$1.10 (this including a daily Field Allowance of ten cents). John Cleary was to be a recruit during the First Draft.

Having undergone some weeks of training before attesting on October 3, Private Cleary was to immediately embark on that same October 3 with the others of *The First Five Hundred*, onto the Bowring Brothers’ vessel *Florizel* awaiting its passengers in St. John’s Harbour.



The ship sailed on the morrow to its rendezvous off the south coast of the Island where she was to join the convoy transporting the 1st Canadian Division across the Atlantic.

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

In the United Kingdom Private Cleary trained with the Newfoundland contingent: firstly in southern England; then in Scotland at Fort George – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; at Edinburgh Castle – where it provided the first garrison from outside the British Isles; and later again at the tented *Stobs Camp* near the town of Hawick to the south-east of Edinburgh.



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

(Right below: *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 ordered south 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’*, were sent 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.*



The 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, comprising those four Companies, 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D', was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

It had then been during that period spent at Aldershot that Private Cleary of 'B' Company* – he was not alone in doing so - had been prevailed upon, he on August 16, to re-enlist for the duration of the war.**

****At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.**



(Right above: Some of the men of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915 – from *The Fighting Newfoundlander* by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)

During this period of some eight months spent in service in the United Kingdom, Private Cleary was to amass a somewhat chequered disciplinary record. It may suffice to record the consequences of his behaviour: a total of fifty days...confined to camp, a combined loss of...seventeen days' pay and other miscellaneous fines and punishments.

More was to follow (see further below).

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

On August 20, 1915, Private Cleary and his comrades-in-arms 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 two weeks billeted in British barracks in the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, he and the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment disembarked at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.

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



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(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 below: A century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla Bay, and where Private Cleary and the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was to serve during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011)



However, while the majority of the Battalion was to serve there for exactly three months, Private Cleary was to be transported away from there in just over nine weeks, on November 25, a day on which the *Suvla Bay* area was to be struck by a freak rain-, snow-, and ice-storm, subsequently to be followed by flooding, all of which was to cause horrific casualties to both sides.

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Private Cleary, however was to be a victim of none of the above. On that same date he was evacuated from *Suvla Bay* on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Lanfranc* to hospital (the Barracks Isolation Hospital) at the British military complex at Abbassia – the British barracks close to Cairo where his Battalion had spent time at the beginning of September. There he was to be admitted on December 2 to undergo treatment for a venereal problem.



(Right above: The image of HMHS *Lanfranc* seen here in her war-time white garb with red crosses, is from the *Old Ship Picture Galleries* web-site. She was later torpedoed and sunk on April 17 of 1917 with a loss of forty-two lives, almost half of them German wounded.)

After almost six weeks of medical attention Private Cleary was discharged from hospital in Cairo from where he was to travel northwards to the Mediterranean coast and to the large British Sidi Bishr Base Depot at Alexandria to which he reported to duty on January 10 of the New Year, 1916.



(Right: One of the main thoroughfares in the Egyptian city of Alexandria at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

Following some three weeks at the British Base Depot, Private Cleary would re-join the 1st Battalion on the last day of the same month in the vicinity of the port of Suez, at the southern end of the Canal.

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Not only during the first weeks of Private Cleary's service, then followed by his absence due to those medical problems, but even since the very first days 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 afore-mentioned floods – and 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 it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

**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.*

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 was to 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 were also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* was undertaken. The operation would take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion providing part of the rear-guard on this second occasion also.



(Right above: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was 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*)

(Right below: *The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1st Battalion were among the last to leave on two occasions, at Suvla Bay and at Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis from Illustration*)

When the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city Alexandria, having arrived there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to Suez, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders as, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.



And, as seen above, it had been early during this period to be spent at Suez that Private Cleary was to report back *to duty*, on January 31, with the Newfoundland Battalion.

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

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It was to be during the period now to follow that Private Cleary was to find himself in trouble again, his misdemeanours perhaps to be considered more serious on this occasion since he was at this time...*on active service*. On February 19 he was tried and found guilty of breaching the *King's Regulations* on two occasions – *absent from parade and absent without leave* - and the ensuing court-martial thereupon sentenced him to fifty-six days of FP1*, a sentence which should have taken him beyond the day that the Battalion was to embark from Port Tewfiq for the French Mediterranean port of Marseilles and on to the *Western Front*.

**Field Punishment 1, replacing the earlier flogging, usually consisted of either: attaching the offender with a rope or strap to an immovable object such as a post, gate or, more often, a gun wheel, for a number of hours; or drilling for hours in full marching order and equipment. Life was to be rendered uncomfortable but not harmful to the offender.*

In the case of men from 1st Battalion 'pegged out' on the sand to spend the day in the sun, they would apparently pull out the pegs and find a shady spot to pass the time. Evidently someone was turning a blind eye.



(Right: *Port Tewfiq at some time before the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

His sentence notwithstanding, Private Cleary was among the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* who boarded His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq on March 14 to sail up through the *Suez Canal* en route to France. The Newfoundlanders disembarked in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles on March 22.

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(Preceding page:) *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 arrived at 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 travelled unused in a separate wagon. De-training at the local station at two in the morning, the Newfoundlanders had still faced a long march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.



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

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 marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* was to become a part of their history.



On April 13, the 1st Battalion had marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where they would be billeted, would receive reinforcements and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the trenches of the *Western Front*.

The Newfoundlanders were also soon to be preparing for the 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.

(Right: *A part of the re-constructed trench system in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel* – photograph from 2007(?))

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*.



**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.*



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

There are other numbers of course: the fifty-seven thousand British casualties incurred in four hours on that same morning of which nineteen-thousand were recorded as having been *killed in action or died of wounds*. It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the killing 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 & 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.



The son of John Cleary, labourer, and of Mary Cleary (née *Breen* or *Brien*) of 10, Nunnery Hill in the city – perhaps later, by 1920 and temporarily, of 63, Compton Street, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A., - he was brother to Elizabeth and also likely to Alice.



**The couple married May 9, 1887.*

(Right: *This family memorial, to be found in the Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's, commemorates and honours the sacrifice of Private John Cleary. – photograph from 2022, with thanks for same to my wife, Claire.*)

Private Cleary was reported as having been *killed in action* at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, while serving with 'B' Company during the fighting of the first day of *the Somme*.



John Nicholas Cleary had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, May 31, 1895 (from Roman Catholic Parish Records).

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(The photograph of Private Cleary on the preceding page is from the Provincial Archives)

Private John Cleary was eligible for the 1914-1915 Star, as well as the British War Medal (centre) and the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 19, 2023.