

CONTAINING GRIEF:

Newfoundland Newspapers and Beaumont Hamel, July-November, 1916

BY TERRY BISHOP STIRLING

ON 1 JULY 1916, THE NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT FOUGHT IN THE OPENING OFFENSIVE OF THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME. NEAR THE SMALL FRENCH TOWN OF BEAUMONT HAMEL, 753 MEN LEFT THEIR TRENCHES AND WERE QUICKLY MOWED DOWN BY GERMAN MACHINE GUNS. THOUGH FIGURES VARY SLIGHTLY, 324 MEN WERE KILLED OR LISTED AS MISSING AND PRESUMED DEAD, AND ANOTHER 386 WERE WOUNDED; ONLY 68 WERE ABLE TO ANSWER THE ROLL CALL ON THE FOLLOWING DAY.¹

The decision to raise a distinct Newfoundland unit whose men would fight together may have been a source of national pride, but it ultimately resulted in a tragedy that is regarded as a pivotal moment in the province's history. As 2016's various centenary commemorations demonstrated, Beaumont Hamel still elicits strong feelings that combine pride, grief, and anger.

Many historians have written about the details of the Somme offensive, and Newfoundlanders' role in that bigger battle. Others have looked at Beaumont Hamel's longer term significance. Robert Harding examined the enduring cultural impact of Newfoundland's "Glorious Tragedy," arguing that,

What emerged was a common press image of a failed attack where death and destruction

were not the most important repercussions. Of greater importance was the nobility of the battalion's effort which provided it with the military reputation it had lacked for the first two years of the war. According to the Newfoundland press, Beaumont Hamel could not be viewed by Newfoundlanders as a tragic defeat because in actual fact it had been a resounding achievement which should make them proud of their battalion and their country.²

More recently, Sean Cadigan examined the impact of World War One, and specifically the losses at Beaumont Hamel, on post-war politics in Newfoundland, including the loss of self government in 1934. He argued that the tragedy undermined the reform momentum of William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union, a momentum gaining ground before the war partly in reaction to another great tragedy of the period, the sealing disaster of spring 1914.³

In this day of social media news is almost instantaneous, but in 1916 the people of Newfoundland depended on official sources for war news or waited for letters from servicemen overseas. There were long lines at the postal and telegraph offices, especially when there was news or rumours of new casualties. Anxious families and friends also turned to the press for updates on all of the war news. The extent of the tragedy at Beaumont Hamel naturally created great distress and led to pressure on the newspapers to provide information on the fate of the Newfoundland Regiment. In addition to the time lapse in the relay of news and the understandable confusion in a time of great crisis, wartime information was censored on both

sides of the Atlantic, sometimes causing further delays and misinformation.

How did Newfoundlanders first learn about what had happened on 1 July 1916? How did newspaper editors attempt to portray the losses in a way that honoured the dead and wounded, but did not undermine the country's war effort?

Cultural historian Jay Winter argued that, "Traditional modes of seeing the war, while at times less challenging intellectually or philosophically, provided a way of remembering which enabled the bereaved to live with their losses, and perhaps to leave them behind."⁴ In the first few weeks following 1 July Newfoundland's newspapers gradually revealed a picture of enormous loss and suffering. The headlines and editorials portrayed this toll using romantic language and stressing traditional values of masculinity, race, and nation. As the casualties mounted, the press of all political stripes stressed the bravery of the young servicemen who fought like "seasoned veterans," and their honour in dying for king and country. The accounts, especially in letters and poems, often portrayed the fight as a crusade of right against might.

Finally, once it became impossible to keep up the pretence that Beaumont Hamel was a great victory, they attempted to find meaning in the devastation by linking the campaign to later victories. These accounts may have reflected the sincere beliefs of the newspaper editors, at least one of whom lost a son at Beaumont Hamel, but they were also politically necessary to help the country deal with the communal trauma, to sustain recruitment, and to maintain support for the continued war effort on the home front.

First reports

By the spring of 1916 there were hints in letters home and inklings in the local papers that the allies were ready to launch a major offensive on the western front. A 28 June editorial from *The Daily Star* is really quite extraordinary: it seems to be announcing the attack. Clearly this was not a concern for the censors. Presumably, if the bombardment was not enough to alert the enemy, the military authorities were not worried about a story like this in a small paper on the other side of the Atlantic.

All signs of the times seem to indicate that the opportunity is almost ripe for a big offensive movement of the Anglo-French forces on the Western front.



British War Medal (1914-1920)
This medal was awarded to members of the British and Imperial Forces who either entered a theatre of war or entered service overseas between 5 August 1914 and 11 November 1918.

Scarcely a day passes but the War Office communications indicate the increasing activity in the theatre of war, British and French troops taking the initiative in bombing the German positions and in continually harassing their opponents, while the British artillery seems to give the enemy no rest whatsoever.

Such activities usually precede attacks in force and are conducted with the intention of wearing down the resisting force and weakening the morale of the enemy, an intention that must surely have been well accomplished by the immense amount of ammunition fired into German lines during the last couple of weeks.

On 1 July some of the newspapers did report on the "Great Drive" or "Great Push" or "Great Advance," and predicted that it would be a significant turning point for the war. They wrote of British gains with light casualties. At that point there was no specific reference to the Newfoundland Regiment.

British headquarters in France, July 1 –
A tremendous British Offensive was launched

at half past seven this morning over a front extending twenty miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a heavy bombardment.

The British have already occupied the German front line, and have captured many prisoners.

The terrific bombardment which preceded the attack lasted an hour and a half.

It is too early yet to give any particulars of the fighting, which is developing in intensity.

The British casualties have so far been comparatively light, according to official reports.

This story ends: "A British Staff officer who witnessed the advance at the Junction of the French and British lines said the attack was launched as though the men were on parade" (*The Daily Star* 1 July, 1916). This last line, though about Kitchener's new army generally, would re-emerge: senior army officers would be quoted as admiring the Newfoundlanders who followed orders and marched on command like brave professional soldiers.

Around the 5th and 6th, the St John's papers began to recount the part Newfoundlanders played on 1 July. It was still within the context of a great victory, and casualties were reported as relatively light. The first reported fatalities were serving with units other than the Newfoundland Regiment.⁵ On 8 July *The Twillingate Sun* reported on a message received from Premier Morris:

Premier Morris wiring from London says no complete list of casualties yet received. Number notified to date 230.

He says London papers speak in high terms of Newfoundland troops and extend sympathy to those fallen.

Its editorial combined cautious optimism with an unfortunately accurate warning.

Judging by our own regiment and the small number wounded, with none killed so far, it looks as if the German resistance is very weak.

Of course it is too early to count the chickens. Germany may yet be able to stem the tide, and things may settle back to the old trench warfare with a few miles as the only gain. Until a German army is actually cut off, and surrenders run into six figures, we may not count a victory.

It is especially gratifying to this country that our boys – the flower of our country – should be taking an active part in the great drive, whether it be the final drive, or only the beginning of a series.

From about 6 July the newspapers continued to list more and more dead and wounded.

It is easy to dismiss this delay as censorship, and it is also reasonable to assume that information on those chaotic opening days of the Somme offensive was held up and confused. But, as indicated in Morris's message above, it is also true that authorities tried to notify families of those on the casualty lists privately, before publishing names. Typically, families would receive a telegram. To add to the delay, government routinely instructed telegraph operators to postpone delivering the telegraph until the government had notified the local clergyman, or some other community leader, so that they could be present to comfort the family as they received the devastating news.

But such consideration had to be abandoned in the wake of the large-scale losses at Beaumont Hamel. Undoubtedly as some families received the terrible news, rumours and worry began to grow. On 6 July, Governor Davidson wrote to Acting Premier JR Bennett, and "Very sorrowfully" passed on the long list of killed, wounded and missing which he had received that day. He suggested that given the length of the list the usual procedure of notifying families individually first should be suspended and the names published by the press as soon as possible to "relieve, to some extent, the public anxiety." Some Newfoundlanders, then, would have learned about the fate of their loved one by reading the newspaper.

The Great Advance

At first the deaths and injuries were put in the context of a mighty victory, with the allies squeezing the enemy on three fronts. Stories expressed pride in the Regiment's contribution to the advance. The first page of the 8 July edition of *The Daily Star* is particularly striking; it featured many small articles with the following positive headlines:

Hard Fight Brings Gains
1000 Yards of Trenches Captured by the British
British Continue Successful Drive
British Troops had to Overcome Big Obstacles
Triple defeat forces enemy Withdraw Lines
King Congratulates the Gallant Troops

The Premier's message
Huns Face Big Problem
More gains by British
First fruits of Valor for
our Lads

The Governor's praise for the Regiment, published in *The Daily Star* on 7 July was one of the first messages from dignitaries that lauded their performance.

Many of the honourable and gallant gentlemen who constitute all ranks in our Regiment have laid down their lives or have been stricken by wounds in the fighting on the 1st of July. It is the noblest end of all to lay down life for the highest principles and for the honour of our name, our Race, and our Empire.

The world will ring forever with the imperishable fame of the heroes of Newfoundland who have made sure for all time that the Loyal Colony is worthy of its ancient name.

Other accolades followed, such as this note of respect and sympathy from Field Marshall Haig, published in the *Evening Telegram* 10 July 1916.

No 330
Telegram (Recd 9th July, 7:30)
Newfoundland may well feel proud of her sons. The heroism and devotion to duty they displayed on 1st July has never been surpassed. Please convey my deepest sympathy and that of the whole of our armies in France in the loss of the brave officers and men who have fallen for Empire and our admiration of their heroic conduct. Their efforts contributed to our success and their example will live.
Douglas Haig

General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, commander of the British 4th Army's VIII Corps, wrote to Morris on 6 July and his message was published in *The Weekly Advocate* on 24 July. His dramatic last line is still one of the most repeated statements about the men's conduct in battle.

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—Douglas Haig

That battalion covered itself with glory on the 1st of July by the magnificent way in which it carried out the attack entrusted to it ... There were no waverers, no stragglers, and not a man looked back. It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valor, and its assault only failed because dead men can advance no further.

Local commentators repeated similar themes. They marvelled at how quickly the boys had become men and seasoned soldiers who “never wavered.” Several accounts told of men falling and urging their comrades to go on. They repeated

their belief that the fight for Britain was worth it and their faith that their deeds would never be forgotten. Accounts of individual losses united readers and reminded them that their grief was shared. Even those providing them with the terrible news were not immune from the heartache. WJ Herder, proprietor of the *Evening Telegram*, lost a son at Beaumont Hamel and Governor Davidson's nephew died elsewhere on the Somme front on 1 July.

The Mail and Advocate had an almost full-page story on 8 August that was typical. By this time the full extent of the losses was known and several survivors had recounted their stories in letters home, some of which were published.

“THE PART PLAYED BY THE NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT IN THE BIG DRIVE, JULY 1st”

The Newfoundlanders were given what is now recognized to have been an impossible task, and although they failed the story of their bravery and daring will live forever.

After describing the fate of the other British troops who went before them, the story continued:

Now came the turn of the Newfoundlanders. The fate which had overcome their comrades daunted them not one bit. These boys – their average age was under twenty-four – were as steady as veterans, as steady as on the parade in St John's when they embarked for England to fight for the Empire. Not a man hesitated.

With a cheer they were
over the parapet ...

Officers fell right and left,
but as they fell, they waved
their men on, "Right to it
this time," was the cry ...
Companies melted away,
but as each man fell, he
always cried "Now right on
boys, right to it this time"—
that was their slogan.

Looking for meaning

This passage was one of the first to refer to the *failed* attempt. By that time, it had become difficult to keep up the talk of a glorious victory. But there were still attempts to see positives and to link the action which began on 1 July to later victories. As early as 10 July the *Evening Telegram* began to re-cast July 1st as the beginning of a broader longer-term advance which now challenged German troops at several points.

For this reason, the success of one of the Allied drives is not to be measured by the progress it achieves, but also by advances made possible elsewhere, and the advantage to the Allies' position viewed as a whole.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Somme offensive, as it is now known, has been the resumption by the British of the drive forward.

The purpose, this article maintained, was not merely to draw the Germans away from one other point (Verdun), "but to show that nothing less than a systematic sustained pressure is intended upon the German lines, until these lines break, or it is apparent that they cannot be broken."

In November the papers reported that the allies had finally taken Beaumont Hamel. Some accounts tied this and the relief of Verdun directly to the action begun on 1 July. Perhaps direct or indirect linkages between these later victories and their earlier losses would comfort readers.

Not surprisingly all of these stories were accompanied by calls for more men to replace those who had fallen. As



Victory Medal (1914-1919). The front depicts a winged classical figure representing victory. In general, all recipients of the British War Medal should have also received the Victory Medal.

early as 14 July an *Evening Telegram* editorial titled, "Are we Rowing Our Weight in the Boat?" urged Newfoundlanders to learn from their own great loss, "to regard things a little less selfishly, less parochially, than is our wont," and to refill the Regiment's ranks. Keeping up morale and recruitment was a difficult task. Young men were urged to sign up, and there were also some calls for conscription. Others were urged to give money or their time to support the war effort in whatever way they could as a way to honor the fallen.

Appealing to honor and duty, and portraying the war as a just fight for civilization, had always been central to recruiting drives, but now Newfoundland had its own heroes, and men were called to take up their fight so that they would not have died in vain. Local poet James Murphy's

poem, "You're Wanted in France," published in the *Evening Telegram* on 17 July, urged men to enlist, using traditional language and ideas about supporting comrades, upholding "justice" and "truth," and behaving with manly valour. The third stanza contains all of these themes.

The youth who won't go he lacks
manhood and pride.
For to stand in the breach where
his Countrymen died.
To champion the cause both of Justice and Truth.
The one who won't go is a cowardly Youth.
Where the cannons are roaring and
Bright gleams the lance.
Won't you list to the summons,
you're wanted in France.

Tragedy, Grief, Nobility: Letters and Poems

The editorials and news stories recounting the valour of the Regiment continued and all of the papers present numerous such accounts. Reporters' stories were augmented by letters from soldiers and their families, and poems written by family and friends. Many of the letters described soldiers' experience, but those published often included notes of humour or reassurance such as the following letter from Pte William Mitchell to his mother, 47 Spencer Street, St John's.

15 General Hospital Le
Treport, France July 3rd,
1916

My Dear Mother: I came
down to this hospital by
Ambulance Train today,
because on Saturday, July
1st, I was foolish enough
to stop a bullet, just below
my collar bone, which
though painful enough, is
not I hope at all serious,
and I hope it will not
be long before I shall be
shipped on back to St
John's. This hospital is a
healthy place by the sea on
the top of a high cliff, so
it gives us chaps the best
chance of making a good
recovery. I hope to write a
letter myself in a few days.

Meanwhile I am your loving son,
William Mitchell

But no matter how cheerful or positive they tried to
be, many of the letters revealed more of the real horrors
the men had faced. On 22 July the *Evening Telegram*
published a letter by soldier Bert Ellis, which repeated
the theme of bravery and honor but also exposed the
stark reality that the men had endured.

The Newfoundland Regiment is about done.
They stood to their guns almost to the last
man and fought like those who have no fear.
When the roll was called only 43 answered.
When I was crawling back I was all alone and
never met a soul all the way back, which was
400 yards, only Dead! Dead! Everywhere.
The awful sight, it made me so sick that I
used to lie down and wonder if I would go
on or stay there.

He continued:

Our boys acted throughout like heroes. They
went up on top singing just as if they were
going on a march instead of facing death. The
place we went over, or just in front of us, was
called the Happy Valley or the Vale of Death
... But our boys showed no fear.



The Victory Star. It was awarded to all who
served in any theatre of war against Germany
between 5 August 1914 and 31 December
1915. Newfoundlanders who fought at
Gallipoli would have received this medal.

Other sources hint that not
everyone accepted the official
account of Beaumont Hamel
or reconciled themselves to
the inevitability of the losses.
There were other responses
such as those revealed in the
correspondence of Catherine
Anderson, whose son was listed
as missing at Beaumont Hamel
and then officially declared dead.
She wrote the governor and the
military authorities on 21 May
1917 *more than 10 months* after
the battle. This letter, included in
her son's official military records,
reveals that she, and perhaps
others, still struggled to accept
what had happened on July 1:

To whom it may concern. [I]
don't know if this is the correct
address ... I am sending my
darling son's photo to you to

see if it will be of any use to you as there are
now hopes of being able to trace our missing
men. You will see by the photo that he was
posted as missing on July 1st 1916 and later
I was sent official notice that he was believed
killed in action, but there are many of us who
believe they are alive. If you have any proof of
my son's death will you kindly send such to
me, his broken-hearted mother.⁶

It is to such sources we need to turn to see the
personal grief. It is hard to capture from newspaper
accounts, though it does come through in some of the
letters and particularly in the poetry, good and bad, that
was frequently published in the press.

The following poem, published in the *Evening
Telegram* on 10 July, was written by a man in memory
of his childhood playmate. It is a poignant tribute
which juxtaposed the innocent youth with the fallen
soldier, and readers can feel the author's sorrow and
shock that his boyhood friend was so quickly a soldier
and then so quickly gone. The honors and praise gave
him little comfort.

"Dedicated" ... To the Memory of Lieutenant
Shortall, who Gave His life in defense of Empire and
Home, by his friend and classmate, Payson J Kinsella.

May His Soul Rest in Peace:

I do not know.
I leave it to others to tell the tale
Of a soldier's death in France,
And a paean of martial glory
To that glorious line's Advance,
But 'twill not wake the eternal slumbers.
(Dear Dick – Dear lad, now sleep!)
I do not know how best to tell,
I know not if to write were well,
When the heart feels more to weep.

I do not know.
Mine is rather the humble lay,
Thy deeds of valour let others tell,
I but write of the schoolboy day.
I remember dear lad one happy hour
Of the honours and plaudits well –
Know? – not I – of his glorious end,
When the dead they brought from
“Advance” –
I knew him better as boyhood's friend,
Dear lad – poor lad in France.

I do know
And I do not care –
What honor glory gave,
They tell me thy name will live for aye,
And the fame and honor remains – they say –
But for me I but think of that grave.
How restand to-day, old schoolmate mine,
Where they've given thy rest to France?
Dear lad, there's peace where thy comrades are
And prayers will go to that land afar,
Where all died in the last “Advance.”

But this I know:
Wherever they gave thy body rest,
(Where the tricolor waves perchance).
Thy memory is dear in one homely heart,
'Till that great last hour, when none shall part –
With no break in the “Great Advance;”
God's benison upon thy sleep, dear lad,
'Neath the sun-kissed sod of France.

Did the way the military, the government and the press delivered the accounts of Beaumont Hamel as a noble and worthwhile sacrifice help people to cope and to go on? That is difficult to answer. Newspaper research can more readily depict the message presented than the impact or reception of that message. People did continue to work at home, and men continued

to enlist, though in declining numbers. Many of the letters from parents in the press and in the soldiers' files repeated the same themes – their sons died a good death fighting for a just cause. Others, however, revealed bitterness and anger. The assurances that the losses at Beaumont Hamel made a difference in a necessary war, the accounts of bravery, and the repeated praise of the Regiment by high-ranking officers were not just means of providing news. Together with local memorial services, and familial and neighbourly support, they sought to ameliorate the grief of a country dealing with the shared trauma of Beaumont Hamel. **NQ**

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John Player and Sons Cigarette Cards (shown here and p 15 & 16). Colonial and Indian Army Badges: A Series of 25” 6.7 x 3.5 cm, Imperial Tobacco Company (of Great Britain and Ireland Ltd). [September, 1916]