

ASPECTS

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THE NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT in the Battle of Cambrai

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AS THE TRAGEDY OF THE ROYAL NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT ADVANCE NEAR BEAUMONT-HAMEL ON JULY 1, 1916, HAS RESONATED WITH THE PEOPLE OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, MUCH OF THE ATTENTION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR EXPLOITS OF THE REGIMENT AMOUNT TO TWO MAIN MEMORY CONSTRUCTS: THE BLUE PUTTEES = THE REGIMENT; BEAUMONT-HAMEL = THE BATTLES. BUT THE BLUE PUTTEES ONLY MADE UP 9 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL OF ENLISTMENTS IN THE REGIMENT. BEFORE BEAUMONT-HAMEL, THE REGIMENT HAD ALREADY RECEIVED THEIR BAPTISM BY FIRE IN THE HARSH DESERT-LIKE CONDITIONS ON THE GALLIPOLI PENINSULA. ACTUALLY IT WAS WITH GREAT RELIEF, AND A SENSE OF FOREBODING IRONY, THAT SOLDIERS LOOKED FORWARD TO ESCAPING THE HOT DAYS, COLD NIGHTS, FLIES, AND INTESTINAL DISEASES OF THE WASTELAND IN SUVLA BAY TO THE QUIET WESTERN FRONT SECTOR OF THE SOMME IN THE SPRING OF 1916. BEAUMONT-HAMEL IS ONLY ONE OF 15 BATTLES OR ATTACKS THAT THE REGIMENT FOUGHT AND THE ONLY ONE DURING THE ENTIRE WAR WHERE SOLDIERS FAILED TO REACH AN OBJECTIVE ASSIGNED TO THEM. HOWEVER, THE WAR CONTINUED FOR TWO AND HALF YEARS AFTER JULY 1, 1916, AND THE REGIMENT WOULD SUFFER MORE CUMULATIVE CASUALTIES.

While many view Beaumont-Hamel as being the start and end of the war for Newfoundland, it is actually more like the beginning.

After Beaumont-Hamel

The losses at Beaumont-Hamel became a rallying cry for survivors and new recruits as they rebuilt the tattered Regiment and would carry them throughout the war as they continued to bring the battle to the enemy. By October, the Newfoundland Regiment was ready to rejoin the fight. They were shipped to the village of Gueudecourt, which had been obliterated in previous fighting. This time, under no illusions about what war

really was, they set about to exact their revenge on the enemy for the slaughter of their comrades on July 1.

While the 1st battalion of the Essex Regiment withered under a counterattack and withdrew to safety, the Newfoundland Regiment held their ground. Undaunted, the soldiers put up a spirited defense, bombing their way down a 400-metre section of trench formerly occupied by the Essex. By thinning out their lines they accomplished what the Essex thought was impossible. The Newfoundland Regiment consolidated the hard fought positions, even though the line they were tasked to protect was more than double their objective. By the end of the day, losing nearly half its number to



The commemorative park at Masnières

casualties, the Regiment recorded one of the few successes in the Battle of Le Transloy.

It would be called upon numerous times to take the difficult lead in battles to come. On April 14, 1917, the Regiment fought in the Battle of Arras at Monchy-le-Preux. Despite easily reaching their objectives, Monchy-le-Preux would be the second time that the Regiment was all but wiped out. More than 153 Newfoundland soldiers were captured, 166 killed, and 141 wounded out of 611 who assaulted Infantry Hill.

The Regiment advanced twice more before the year's final battle near Cambrai in November 1917. Having been involved in three battles outright and two as a part of reserves already that year (near Sailly-Saillisel in January and March), it was once again called upon to fight in what would become one of the most influential battles in history – the Battle of Cambrai. The tactics and strategies devised for this engagement would forever change the way battles would be fought.

Cambrai

In the early morning of November 20, 1917, Newfoundland Regiment soldiers waited in the fields as the silence was shattered when one thousand artillery guns unleashed a flurry of deadly fire in perfect synchronized harmony.

The Germans, roused, could see lumbering towards them the most concentrated collection of tanks that anyone had ever beheld. These great iron behemoths belched blue and black smoke in the early morning, shaking the pristine virgin battleground as they lurched unevenly forward. Overhead the artillery pounded their positions, and aircraft flew so low that it seemed like the Germans could touch them as they strafed their trenches. Those who did not flee were either captured or killed in quick succession.

It was 10:10 am when the bugle finally sounded for the 29th Division to move forward.

The Newfoundlanders encountered little resistance as they passed over the Hindenburg Line. This immense trench corridor had reinforced concrete walls, and floors with drainage with deep concrete dugouts, and was surrounded by miles of tightly knit barbed wire. The Line was empty of hostile enemies by the time the Newfoundlanders arrived.

Hitherto our advances had been made over bare muddy ground pitted with shell holes, some relics of former battles, others freshly formed as we passed along, with no sign of vegetation anywhere near; but on this occasion we found ourselves strolling ... over virgin soil with grass and thistles and nettles growing knee high. In fact

... numerous hares darted out of the long grass almost at our feet ... many a man prodded at them with his bayonet as they scudded past, and some hearty lads even fired at them.

The Battalion was heading for their first objective, a lock crossing on the St Quentin Canal halfway between the villages of Marcoing and Masnières. After several kilometres and within full view of Marcoing, Masnières, and the lock before them, the Newfoundlanders came under heavy fire from German defences on both sides of the lock. The approach was completely open and flat with only tall grass providing scant protection.

One of the barriers in the way of our men was a bridge commanded by hostile fire. This obstacle brought into play the courage and perseverance of "Ours" and it was not long before it was overcome. Lt Tobin and six men sprang into the gap and ran the bridge, they fell some of them mortally wounded; but the example was there, and the effect not lost for other sections under their commanders, were quite quick to follow, and very soon the bridge was taken ...

They had reached their final advance for the day around 2pm after securing the foot bridge on the canal crossing and attacking the gun pits north of the canal. Masnières still had pockets of resistance but it was decided it would be better to check the advance, as the Essex had yet to cross the canal in force. When the Newfoundland Regiment was preparing to dig in along the canal bank on the western edges of Masnières, nearby villagers came out to greet them.

... the Germans did not have time to remove them, and it was a touching sight to see the delight of these poor people on being released from the captivity in which they had been held since 1914. They were elderly folk for the most part, some of the women carrying their children, and each one was burdened with household possessions tied up in a table cloth or shawl ... They cried tears of happy welcome as soon as we approached them ... as they were weak from privation ... A number of men were dressed in a hybrid uniform and claimed to be Alsations ... these were piloted down to Intelligence Headquarters for further interrogation.

After dark, orders came for each Battalion to send out two mopping up parties to clear out the last remnants of the enemy from Masnières. Each house had to be methodically searched for hidden snipers and machine gunners making entry into every house a very tense operation. Not only did they have to worry about some enemy willing to go down in a blazing gunfight, but as the Newfoundlanders found out, there were still some very old and feeble civilians occupying some of the houses.

With the exception of the failure to capture the enemy's last line of defence and the high ground at Bourlon Wood further north, the day had gone extremely well. It took no more than four hours to break through the concrete trenches and miles of thickly knotted barbed-wire of the once thought impregnable Hindenburg Line. The British had suffered 4000 casualties, nearly 1600 of which belonged to the 29th Division alone, and captured 4200 Germans and more than 100 artillery pieces in the advance. The 29th Division captured 755 prisoners, 20 field guns, three trench mortars, 42 machine guns, 360 tons of wood fuel and 300 tons of coal. The Division on a whole suffered 1581 casualties of which the Newfoundlanders accounted for 248 wounded or killed, some of the highest casualties in the Division.

Counterattack

The British planned to consolidate and settle in for the winter, content in the gains they had made. The Germans, however, were planning a counterattack. Launched ten days later, it came with such ferocity and surprise that it would equal or better the attack the British had launched on the 20th, nearly eroding all the territorial gains from the 20th and ground originally held by the British, as well as threatening several divisions with complete annihilation.

While the British were aware of reinforcements coming into Cambrai, army intelligence assuaged the top brass, saying that there was no possibility of a heavy counterattack due to recent German losses in Flanders and Cambrai. As a consequence the British had left many parts of the newly won line lightly defended and failed to make provisions for large scale reserves in case of a major counterattack, thereby exposing the new massive salient to a determined enemy.

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The Germans would approach from the south-east while another attack would come from the north, effectively pinching off the entire salient. The 29th Division, after ten days of fighting, were the most exposed of all holding the front lines.

The morning of the 30th, Newfoundland Regiment Headquarters met at 5:30am to plan how they were to implement relief of the 16th Middlesex holding the village of Masnières unaware of the pending German counterattack. The Germans commenced a heavy bombardment on Marcoing with gas and high explosive shells. Believing that this was merely a harassing wake up call and that it would end shortly, Headquarters huddled in to wait it out.

But as each half hour passed, the bombing intensified.

Later in the morning, word arrived that the Regiment was to turn out and meet the German counterattack east of Marcoing. Headquarters dispatched company commanders to gather up their platoons scattered throughout the village and rendezvous at a pre-determined position southeast of the village. The shell fire was intense as each company moved through the streets. Several battalions which were ahead of the Newfoundlanders, when confronted with swiftly moving German shock troops, turned and went to ground in a defensive position.

Regiment Surge

Newfoundland Regiment Headquarters attempted to head off the companies by going around the outskirts of Marcoing to reach the assembly area. South of the village, all was pandemonium. A battery of British field guns was intensely shelling the Germans. The scene facing Headquarters was utter chaos. They watched helplessly as the Germans came over the ridge south of the canal in waves. The few guns that were still operational and not abandoned were firing directly into the attacking Germans.

Very shortly after this German infantry appeared on the crest above us. I turned two batteries on them. This was not easy, as they were on our right rear, but we got our guns around in time,

and we were able to hold them up until some of our infantry were found to counterattack, when the Germans were driven back over the crest beyond. All day my batteries were hanging on by their eyelids, expecting to be cut off at any moment. But the men were steady as rocks. The 29th Division infantry didn't yield a yard of ground, in spite of heavy attacks. If they had broken [through] it would

have meant the whole line going ... we were able to give the infantry a good deal of support. Lt Col Walter Murray, 17th Brigade RFA, 29th Division.

With Headquarters cut off from the rest of the battalion, company commanders made a quick decision when they emerged from the village near Marcoing Copse. Surprised not to see any other units other than the Germans, the Newfoundlanders spread out their platoons in attack formation and engaged the enemy with little hesitation. Advancing in platoon rushes at the point of bayonet, the Newfoundland Regiment led the attack down the Marcoing-Les Rue Vertes road and the ridge south of it.

The unflinching Newfoundlanders created a surge. When the King's Own Scottish Borderers and Hampshire regiments (previously sent for cover) witnessed this, they joined in. As a result, the German shock troops, who had been virtually unopposed, now faced a determined and formidable foe and were pushed back over the ridge.

By 4:30pm, darkness cloaked the battlefield and the fighting subsided. The Newfoundland Regiment now had their backs to the canal, in complete reversal of direction from the first day of the battle. They held the southern portion of an extreme salient created by the German counterattack that ran south of Les Rue Vertes, crossing the canal around the eastern extremity of Masnières and then back towards Marcoing along the ridge and crossing back over the canal.

The day's fighting took another heavy toll on a Regiment well used to making big sacrifices. Of 382 men who started the day, the Regiment had lost 174 in the fight, the highest of all units of the 88th Brigade involved, and that of the two units of the 87th Brigade

(King's Own Scottish Borderers and South Wales Borderers) who also took part in defending Marcoing.

Even though the Germans had failed to sever the massive salient created by the British attack on November 20, they came close to cutting off the smaller salient around Masnières. The German attack launched against the right flank in the east was disastrous for the British, almost capturing the 29th Division headquarters during breakfast. With the failure of the 20th Division to hold their own defense, the Germans had punched a big hole in the line that ran as far west as Marcoing, until they were beaten back by the spirited charge led by the Newfoundlanders. By the end of the day, the Germans had still made a sizable dent in the line, capturing 6000 prisoners and 100 guns.

Not since Gallipoli had the Newfoundlanders spent so much time in the front line or under constant fire without respite. Despite the heavy losses sustained by the Newfoundland Regiment, there were few reserves to relieve them or other units in the line. They would have to wait their turn. And their turn would not come before another crushing battle.

Les Rue Vertes Road

On December 1st, the line they occupied faced to the east on their far left, and made a right-angled turn, where a strong point was constructed, placing most of

the line facing south. To make matters worse, A and D Companies, under the command of Captain Herbert Rendell, realized as the sun rose on the morning of the 2nd that the lines they occupied were built behind the lip of a ridge. If the Germans were to launch another attack the men in this sector would not see them until they were within a few metres of the trenches.

They did not appreciate how precarious their situation was until the morning of the 3rd. The Germans launched a barrage of heavy and light trench mortars all across the front line north of the Marcoing – Les Rue Vertes road. They had taken range on the new front lines the day before and were determined to break through it today. The brunt of the concentrated attack was to fall on the Newfoundland Regiment and the South Wales Borderers.

At 11am the Germans launched an infantry attack on the south side of the canal and north of the road. The only thing standing between a rout of the 29th Division once again was a quickly dwindling force precariously perched in unconnected outposts and trenches that were being pulverized by a concentrated bombardment with such deadly accuracy that the trenches were being systematically erased by the deluge. Many men were killed outright. By noon, the Germans had opened a breach in the Newfoundland Line and within minutes had overrun A Company. With the enemy now in possession



Exhuming Newfoundland graves from Marcoing-Masnières battlefield

of all of A Company's trenches and outposts they concentrated the point of their attack on D Company.

With his left rear flank now under attack at the same time he was concentrating on defending the line from the front, Captain Rendell gave up hope of holding the line and bent his line back 90 degrees until it ran parallel with the road and facing the canal.

The Germans came straight towards Regimental Headquarters, who were now facing the real possibility of capture or death. Thankfully for the officers in the dugout, the Germans were halted within 150 yards of the dugout entrance.

On the Cambrai front, while the whole line was out of immediate danger, the Newfoundlanders suffered heavy casualties. Of approximately 200 men in Newfoundland lines and Headquarters in the morning, there were more than 70 casualties. Twenty-two were captured, some of whom later died in enemy hands.

Were it not for the Newfoundlanders lowering their bayonets and leading the charge, the outcome of November 30th may have been far different. But the Regiment suffered tremendous losses. Of the 630 soldiers to have fought during the entire battle, 109 were killed and 384 were wounded or taken prisoner – a 78 per cent casualty rate.

The London Times wrote of the Newfoundland Regiment at Cambrai:

In my earliest despatches in this battle I spoke of one small unit of overseas troops having been engaged who did very well. It is now permissible to say that these were Newfoundlanders.

On more than one occasion before I have spoken of the splendid material of which the Newfoundland Contingent is formed and there has been no engagement in which they have been concerned – and they have had some of the toughest jobs of the war – when they have not borne themselves gallantly.

Field Marshal Douglas Haig heaped further praise on the Newfoundland Regiment in a speech during the unveiling of the National War Memorial in St John's in 1924:

The story of the defence of Masnières and the part which the Newfoundland Battalion played in it, is one which, I trust, will never be forgotten on our side of the Atlantic.



Two weeks after the Battle of Cambrai ended, King George V gave a regal nod to the gallantry of the Regiment by granting the prefix *Royal* to the Newfoundland Regiment. They were the only regiment to be so honoured during the First World War and only the third time, and last in the history of the British Army. **NQ**

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