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MAKING NEWFOUNDLAND'S SOLDIERS: THE NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT, THE BRITISH ARMY, AND TRAINING FOR BATTLE, 1914-1915

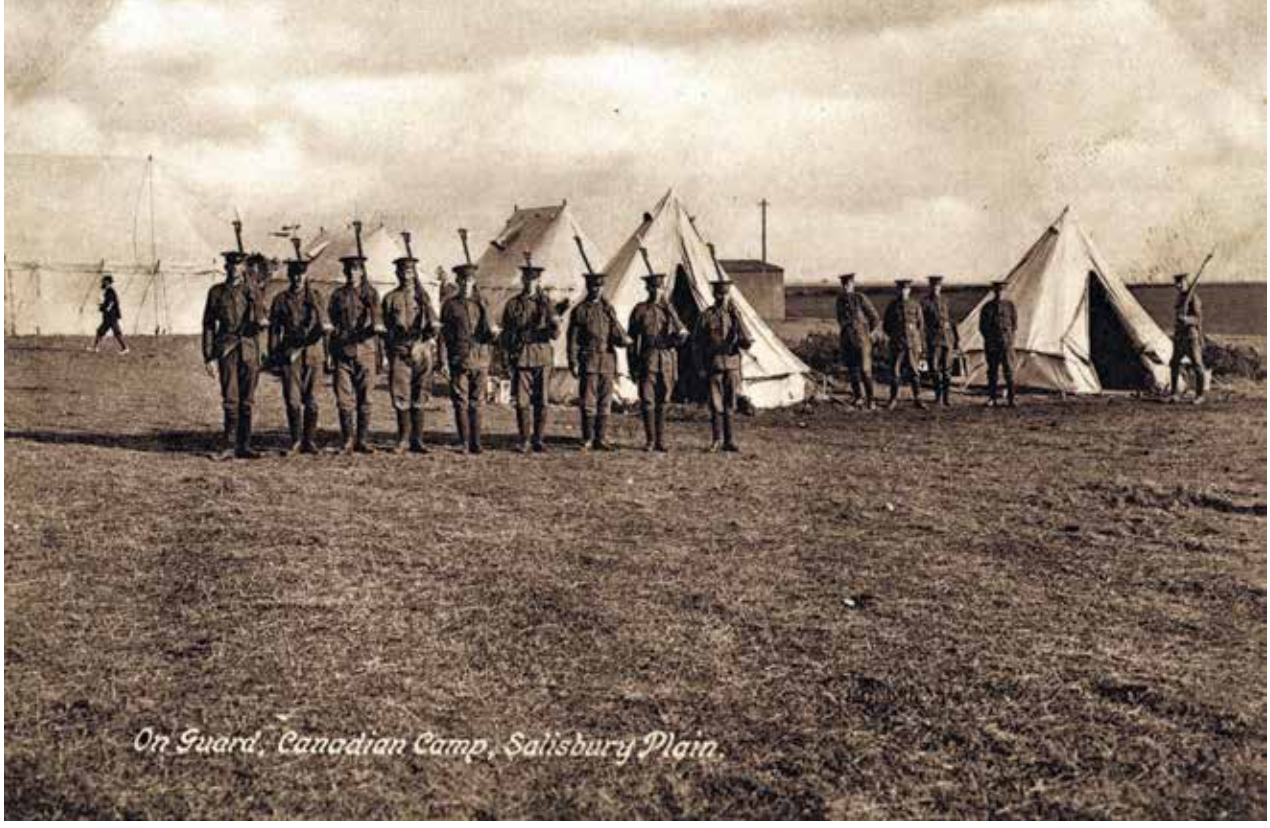
PART I

BY DR MIKE O'BRIEN

ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1914, THE FIRST BATCH OF VOLUNTEERS OF THE NEWLY CREATED NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT ARRIVED AT PLEASANTVILLE CAMP, ON THE SHORE OF QUIDI VIDI LAKE, TO BEGIN TRAINING TO "DO THEIR BIT" IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR.[1] THEY WOULD CONTINUE TO TRAIN AT PLEASANTVILLE UNTIL THEIR DEPARTURE FOR ENGLAND ON SS *FLORIZEL* A MONTH LATER. THEY WOULD THEN UNDERGO MONTHS OF FURTHER TRAINING IN BRITAIN BEFORE BEING DESPATCHED TO THE MIDDLE EAST IN AUGUST 1915. SUCCESSIVE CONTINGENTS WOULD ALSO RECEIVE THEIR PRELIMINARY TRAINING AT PLEASANTVILLE BEFORE HEADING OVERSEAS. BY THE END OF THE WAR, MORE THAN 6,000 MEN TRAINED WITH THE REGIMENT IN PLEASANTVILLE AND IN BRITAIN.[2]

While much has been written on the Newfoundland Regiment's experiences in the First World War, no systematic study has been done of the training which the men of the Regiment received prior to being deployed to the battlefields of Europe. The present work, drawn from accounts of the Regiment's experiences before departing for Gallipoli, training manuals in use during the early stages of the war, and secondary works which deal with training in the British Army, will attempt to examine in detail the Newfoundlanders' preparation for active service. It will also seek to place that preparation in the context of British military practice of the time and assess its effectiveness in meeting the challenges of the battlefield. It will show that, despite a less than optimal start, the Newfoundland Regiment was, by the summer of 1915, no less prepared for service at the front than the vast majority of British infantry units. Nevertheless, while Newfoundland's volunteers were shaped into what became a first-rate military unit, their efficiency and *esprit de corps* was not sufficient to overcome the deficiencies in the British Army's preparation for modern continental warfare. Even after proving their capability in the Dardanelles campaign, the Regiment still had to undergo a difficult and costly practical learning experience in the trenches of France and Flanders from 1916 to 1918.

The first part of this study will deal with the establishment of a training regime and facilities for the Regiment at the start of the war, the contemporary British military doctrines upon which that training was based, and the Regiment's activities at Pleasantville in 1914. The second part, to be published in the Winter issue of *Newfoundland Quarterly*, will cover the more advanced training that the Regiment received in Britain, as well as a discussion of how well their training prepared them for what they would encounter on the Western Front.



The Establishment of Pleasantville Camp

Training hundreds of new recruits posed a particular challenge in the Newfoundland of 1914. Other than a local unit of the Royal Naval Reserve, the Colony had no pre-war military institutions. No administrative mechanisms existed for a military unit, nor did any training staff or facilities. Unlike Canada, where training cadres were provided by existing Militia Units, virtually everything required for the creation and maintenance of an infantry battalion had to be put together from scratch. Moreover, the people responsible for the raising of the Regiment had little knowledge of what they were doing. Neither Governor Walter Davidson nor the members of the Newfoundland Patriotic Association, the non-governmental body charged with administering the unit, had any military experience. For instance, they were clearly unaware when they decided to raise a 500-man infantry contingent that no unit of that size could be employed on the front lines by the British Army. This necessitated expanding the Regiment to more than 1,000 men, and hundreds of trained reserves, before the unit saw any combat. Creating and sustaining a full infantry battalion would be a far bigger task than anyone in St John's envisioned in August 1914.[3]

In peacetime, new recruits in the British Army received only a small amount of elementary training at a regimental depot before being posted to an existing infantry battalion, where most of their training would take place among more seasoned soldiers.[4] Prior to August 1914, no provisions were made for the training of entire units of new recruits in the United Kingdom, never mind in Newfoundland. Preparing the Regiment for combat involved not only teaching newly-enlisted soldiers how to fight, but also teaching equally inexperienced officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) how to lead them.[5]

The Newfoundland Regiment was not unique in this regard. In Britain, the "New Armies" raised under Lord Kitchener's directive at the start of the war also consisted of infantry units raised from scratch. Many of these battalions bore a distinct resemblance to the Newfoundland Regiment in their strong sense of local identity and the diverse social composition of their rank and file. As was the case with the Newfoundland Regiment, many of the officers and NCOs in the New Armies were no more familiar with military practice than the soldiers under their command, and often struggled to stay ahead of the men they were tasked with instructing.[6]

Many of the first 500 volunteers had previously undergone paramilitary training with local Cadet Corps or the privately-organized Legion of Frontiersmen, but that training bore little resemblance to what was required of a British infantryman in 1914.[7] Moreover,

a large number of the volunteers, like Private Arthur Manuel, "had never seen a soldier, professional or otherwise."[8] While leaders of both Cadets and Frontiersman were able to make some very useful contributions to the training of the Regiment, the nascent unit would have to lean heavily on the few experienced soldiers in its ranks. The unit depended particularly on Captain Conn Alexander, an ex-British officer who had seen action in the Anglo-Boer War, and who did much to ensure that training at Pleasantville corresponded as much as possible to British Army practice. Alexander was also an inspirational leader, greatly admired by the men of the Regiment.[9]

LOCAL BUSINESSES PITCHED IN TO HELP, PROVIDING EVERYTHING FROM TENTS TO KITCHENS TO MOTOR CARS.

While Alexander proved to be a real asset to the Regiment, such "dug-out" regulars, who were often unfamiliar with current army doctrine and training, were sometimes "more trouble than they were worth," and tended to clash with the better-educated volunteers under their authority.[10] Such was clearly the case with George Paver, a retired British Army private who was appointed as Regimental Sergeant-Major based on his military experience. But that experience had been at the lowest rank of the Army, and he turned out to have little understanding of his new role. Paver was unpopular with the men of the Regiment, who found him to be "officious and domineering."[11]

The shortage of qualified training personnel was matched by a dearth of up-to-date military equipment. Pleasantville in 1914 consisted mostly of open field, its most notable facility being an old cricket pitch. Given the lack of local preparation for war, this had to be done in a very rough and rudimentary fashion, generally without proper equipment. Local businesses pitched in to help, providing everything from tents to kitchens to motor cars. HMS *Calypso*, the training ship for the local Royal Naval Reserve unit, provided the Regiment with some bolt-action rifles, but these were long Lee-Enfields of the type used in the Anglo-Boer War, rather than the newer short model the British Army adopted in 1904. These were supplemented with a number of even older single-shot Martini-Enfield rifles supplied by the Cadet Corps, which by 1914 were pretty much museum pieces, suitable only for drill. If the rifles left something to be desired, at least they existed. Web gear and most other personal military equipment were not available at Pleasantville until 1915.[12]

The lack of proper uniforms, equipment, and facilities for new recruits was by no means exclusive to Newfoundland. In Britain, some "New Army" battalions were initially issued with old scarlet tunics, while others trained in civilian clothing for months, and some were not issued rifles until as late as February 1915.[13] Pleasantville itself was a reasonably good choice for a training ground, offering plenty of space for tents and parade grounds while still being fairly close to the city's commercial areas.[14] Indeed, the Newfoundland Regiment was very lucky to have a training facility as useful as Pleasantville Camp; many of the new British battalions ended up in very inadequate accommodations without easy access to open spaces for training.[15]

British Army Tactics and Training

Given that the Newfoundland Regiment would go into action as part of the British Army, their organization and training were based on contemporary British military practice, which in the lead-up to 1914 was heavily informed by the experience of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. This was the first war in which the British Army fought an enemy armed with the new weapons developed in the late 19th century, including magazine-fed rifles, machine guns, and quick-firing artillery. The British Army performed very poorly in the early stages of the war, and the conflict subsequently provided British military authorities with, as Rudyard Kipling put it, "no end of a lesson."[16] The following decade saw a major rethinking of the British Army's organization and fighting methods.

The unexpectedly effective firepower employed by the Boers showed the obsolescence of Victorian infantry tactics, and in the war's aftermath the British Army made some major changes. The long-standing practice of moving in close-order formations on the battlefield

led to high casualties when tightly-packed columns were exposed to accurate long-range rifle fire, and thus had to be abandoned. After 1902, close-order movement was used only on the parade square and for marching from place to place. Volley firing, another staple of 19th-century infantry tactics, was also abolished. While firing by volleys maximized the effectiveness of single-shot weapons, it was a very inefficient way of using magazine-fed rifles, especially against a dispersed enemy force making use of cover. Meanwhile, the "snap shooting" of the Boers proved effective in inflicting casualties at long ranges. As a response to this, individual marksmanship, not much of a concern in the Victorian era, became an obsession of the British Army in the decade leading up to 1914.[17]

The abandonment of close-order tactics and volley firing meant that a couple of centuries of military wisdom had to be discarded in a few years. Moreover, both of these now-abandoned practices had involved very close control over soldiers by senior officers who directed all aspects of collective movement and firing. To be effective, the new methods of moving in extended order and firing at will required considerable exercise of individual initiative by both junior officers and NCOs. This change was reflected in a new 1902 training manual, which held that in modern warfare subordinate commanders at all levels had to exercise initiative and act "on their own judgement," even if this meant "departing from their original orders."[18]

The new British fighting methods based on the lessons of the Anglo-Boer War were laid down in the new *Field Service Regulations* (*FSR*) manual, issued in 1909. This document would constitute the fighting doctrines of the British Army, and the aims of army training, at the start of the First World War. Infantry tactics were to be based on "fire and movement," with some forces advancing in rushes while others provided covering fire. The emphasis was all on mobility and manouevre, and *FSR* stressed the need for flexibility and initiative on the battlefield.[19] While the manual contained many old-fashioned concepts, it was still a major advance on the Army's earlier methods.

WHILE THE NEW REGULATIONS SAID THAT LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS HAD TO EXERCISE INITIATIVE, THIS WENT VERY MUCH AGAINST THE MIND-SET OF MOST BRITISH SENIOR OFFICERS

Putting new ideas into practice would prove difficult. While the new regulations said that leaders at all levels had to exercise initiative, this went very much against the mind-set of most British senior officers who were accustomed to a strict and rigid chain of command. Class prejudice also played a significant role in inhibiting serious moves toward encouraging initiative on the part of soldiers of the lower ranks.[20] It was easy enough to abolish Victorian practices like close-order attacks and volley firing, but it was much harder to get rid of the habits of thinking that went along with them.

A new training manual for infantry units, *Infantry Training 1914*, was issued on 10 August 1914, six days after Britain went to war. This would be a guide for the basic training of infantry soldiers in the first two years of the war, including those of the Newfoundland Regiment. It also reflected a recent and major change in the organization of the British infantry battalion. In October 1913, less than a year before the start of the war, the long-standing eight-company structure of the battalion was abandoned, and a new structure of four larger companies, more in keeping with continental European practice, was adopted. This necessitated changes to both tactics and training for British infantry, changes which were not fully assimilated by the army at the outbreak of war.[21]

It is worth observing that *Infantry Training 1914* prescribed a basic training period of six months for new recruits.[22] It should be noted, though, that this applied only to soldiers who enlisted in existing battalions where they could be trained by experienced instructors. For a battalion raised *ex nihilo* from wartime volunteers, the training period would of necessity be longer. None of the newly-raised British Army units would get near the front until well into 1915.[23]

Training at Pleasantville Camp

As soon as Newfoundland's volunteers got settled into their tents at Pleasantville, the training process began, starting with the rudiments of the soldier's trade.

Infantry Training 1914 outlined three "preliminary steps" in training an infantry soldier:

(i) The development of a soldierly spirit.
(ii) The training of the body.
(iii) Training in the use of rifle, bayonet, and spade.[24]

These general steps had to be completed before soldiers were ready to be trained in specific battle tactics. The facilities at Pleasantville, rude though they were, sufficed for the most basic elements in the process. More advanced training, with the actual military weapons and equipment that they would use in battle, had to wait until the soldiers had arrived in the United Kingdom, where they would be able to work with more experienced training staff. For training in the basics, though, Pleasantville would have to do.

A variety of training activities took place at Pleasantville in the last weeks of the summer of 1914, all geared toward turning civilians into soldiers. First, just living in an army camp was itself a form of training. Soldiers had to accommodate their minds quickly to a tightly-regulated existence, as virtually everything in a soldier's life was controlled by the Regiment. They also had to learn the workings of the military system of ranks, and to understand that, unlike a civilian job, service in the army was a way of life.[25] As well they had to accommodate themselves to the strict system of discipline existing in the British Army, which imposed draconian punishments even for what would seem rather minor infractions. While the constant nit-picking was often galling to civilians, soldiers generally came to understand the value of learning to do things "by the book," as a habit of meticulous attention to detail could mean the difference between life and death on the battlefield. The shared experience of military training also built a strong sense of camaraderie and fellowship in the Regiment.[26]

Most of a recruit's days at Pleasantville were taken up by a variety of basic training activities. One of the first things that soldiers had to learn was close-order drill, often referred to as "parade square" drill, which took up much of the men's time in the early weeks of training. Men who had passed through the Cadet Corps already had experience with this, and thus some were able to act as instructors for the rest of the Regiment. Those who had no familiarity with drill were placed in what was dubbed "the awkward squad," where they received extra tutelage from ex-Cadet instructors.[27]

Close-order drill was, as noted above, obsolete when it came to fighting battles, but it remained (and still remains) a key element in military training. For the military, such drill was valuable for instilling discipline and "smartness" in new soldiers. It habituated men to act together and in unison, and most importantly, it trained soldiers to respond instantly and automatically to commands. According to *Infantry Training 1914*, close-order drill was an ideal way to teach "strict discipline and the habit of prompt and unquestioning obedience to orders."[28] Parade square drill, once mastered, also created a quality of "smartness" in a military unit and thus contributed to *esprit de corps*. Too much of it, though, could lead to considerable grousing among men who signed up for a more modern approach to warfare.[29]

Another element of training that began straight away was physical training (known to soldiers as "PT"), which had been an essential part of British military training since the creation of the Army Gymnastic Staff in 1860. By the 1900s, the British Army had adopted the "Ling System" of free exercises performed in unison, meant to develop the entire body, which formed the basis for a new physical training manual issued in 1908.[30] These exercises were to be conducted on a daily basis, for a total of six hours per week. For soldiers of the Regiment, the training day at Pleasantville would always begin with what Sydney Frost would call "physical jerks," which he said "got us away to a good start."[31]

Physical training extended into leisure time as well, in the form of team sports which were strongly encouraged in the British Army. As *Infantry Training 1914* noted, "manly games" were valuable both in keeping up fitness and encouraging a competitive spirit in the men. Team sports were used "to impress the value of combination as well as individual prowess."[32]

One of the most important, and for some soldiers the most hated, forms of physical training was the route march. This consisted of a long march, at a forced pace, over a pre-determined route while carrying weapons and full equipment. While in the early stages of training route marches covered distances of about five miles, they grew gradually longer as training progressed.[33] The purpose of the route march was to build up endurance, to teach men to overcome fatigue and privation, and perhaps most vitally, to toughen up their feet. The importance of the latter factor can hardly be over-stressed. Foot problems were a frequent cause

of casualties among newly-mobilized British reservists in the early, mobile stages of the war, especially on the grueling 12-day retreat from Mons. Many of those whose feet were soft and easily injured would spend the remainder of the war in German prison camps.[34]

The route marches carried out around St John's in September 1914 were relatively easy affairs, generally conducted every other day. At this stage, the men lacked equipment to carry, so it was more like a brisk walk, which most did not find particularly taxing.[35] That would change dramatically after the Regiment arrived in the United Kingdom, where the Regiment would undertake far longer marches carrying a large amount of equipment.

Once close-order drill and physical training were well underway, men would move on to other elements of training. One was extended-order drill, commonly referred to as "skirmishing," which began in the third week of training. Soldiers were taught to advance, several paces apart, over rough ground, while maintaining their general alignment. This was to train men to move in a co-ordinated fashion on a battlefield and to avoid what today would be called "friendly fire" casualties. Extended-order drills were often carried out with some soldiers acting as enemy forces, in order to provide a touch of verisimilitude. The Regiment's extended-order skirmishing drills, carried out in the White Hills, often drew large crowds of civilian onlookers who came out to watch the "mock battles."[36]

Musketry training, in which new recruits learned to use rifles, was another important activity for men of the Regiment, beginning on their second day in camp.[37] Musketry training involved more than just shooting; it also included the care and maintenance of rifles, learning to judge distance, and elements of fieldcraft like concealment and the use of cover. Most of the Regiment's musketry training was carried out at the Rifle Club's range in the South Side Hills, under the supervision of Joseph Moore, a veteran who had spent 21 years in the British Army. As this was September, the government had to warn berry-pickers to keep their distance from the rifle range.[38]

Many First World War recruits had experience firing rifles before the war, especially in Newfoundland, but civilian experience was not necessarily of great value when it came to military training. Skill in careful and precise target-shooting was far less important than the ability to fire a bolt-action rifle rapidly with reasonable accuracy.[39] In the British Army, this involved being able to fire 15 aimed rounds in a minute, and rifle practice focused on achieving rapid, accurate fire at

distances up to 600 yards. Moreover, when employed tactically, rifle fire had to be co-ordinated with the movement of troops, which required considerable practice.[40]

Most of the Regiment's time at Pleasantville was spent on activities such as drill, physical training, and route marches, plus elementary musketry training. Not only were these activities deemed necessary in creating soldiers, they could also be conducted without too much need for specialized instructors. The training day was generally divided up into one-hour segments, each devoted to a particular activity, in order to avoid monotony and to keep the men as alert and interested as possible. The newly-appointed officers of the Regiment also gave the men lectures on everything from personal hygiene, to the care of weapons, to the history of the British Army.[41]

Conclusion

By late September 1914, the men of the Regiment had advanced considerably on their way to becoming British Army soldiers, adjusting to military life and acquiring the skills and strength required to meet the mental and physical requirements of infantry service. For them to be ready for action on the front lines of the war, though, much more preparation would be required. Governor Davidson and the Patriotic Association, not to mention most of the volunteers, realized that this could not be accomplished in St John's. Moreover, with fall setting in, the weather would not remain conducive to training at Pleasantville. So Davidson made arrangements for the Regiment to proceed to Britain as soon as possible.[42]

On October 3, 1914, 537 men of Newfoundland's first contingent, now designated "A" and "B" Companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, boarded SS *Florizel* for Plymouth. Once in the United Kingdom they were able to train with up-to-date equipment, under the supervision of professional British instructors, and at a level unattainable at home. The Regiment's training in Britain, along with an assessment of the effectiveness of that training, will be the subject of Part II of this study, appearing in the next issue. NQ

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1 *Evening Telegram*, 2 September 1914.

2 GWL Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander: A History of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment* (St John's: Government of Newfoundland, 1964), 508.

3 On how the challenges of creating the Regiment were met, see Mike O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky: The Mobilization of the Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1915." *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 22 (2007): 401-427.

4 Mike Chappell, *The British Army in World War I: The Western Front, 1914-1916* (London: Osprey, 2003), 9.

5 Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-1916* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 212-228.

6 GD Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), 73-74; Simkins, Kitchener's Army, 317; Nicholson, The Fighting Newfoundlander, xiii.

7 On the role of these organizations, see Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander*, 91-98; O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," 404.

8 Bryan Davies and Andrew Traficante, *A Boy from Botwood: Pte AW Manuel, Royal Newfoundland Regiment, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017), 23.

9 O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," 410; Sydney Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War: The Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost, MC*, edited by Edward Roberts (St John's: Flanker Press, 2014), 51-52; Francis T Lind, *The Letters of Mayo Lind* (St John's: Creative Publishers, 2001), 16.

10 Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 74; Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 216-217, 226-228.

11 The Rooms Archives (TRA), MG 632, File 22, Alexander to Davidson, 14 October 1914; Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 41-42.

12 O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," 411-414.

13 Martin Pelger, *British Tommy, 1914-1918* (London: Osprey, 1996)

14 Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 30.

15 Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 231-252.

16 *The Times*, 29 July 1901.

17 Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 76-94.

18 *Infantry Training 1902* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office [HMSO], 1902), 191.

19 *Field Service Regulations, Part I: Operations* (London: HMSO, 1909).

20 MA Ramsay, *Command and Cohesion: The Citizen Soldier and Minor Tactics in the British Army, 1870-1918* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 168.

21 Bruce Gudmundsson, *The British Expeditionary Force 1914–15* (Oxford: Osprey, 2005), 25; Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2004), 36.

22 *Infantry Training 1914* (London: HMSO, 1914), 236-240.

23 Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 296-297.

24 *Infantry Training 1914*, 1.

25 Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 73.

26 While most volunteers were able to adjust to life in the army, some did not fit in, and a number of the latter left the Regiment when their original one-year term of service expired in August 1915. Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 91-92.

27 Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 45.

28 *Infantry Training 1914*, 80.

29 Christopher JA Morry, *When the Great Red Dawn is Shining: Howard L Morry's Memoirs of Life in the Newfoundland Regiment*, 30-31.

30 *Manual of Physical Training* (London: HMSO, 1908); James D Campbell, '*The Army Isn't All Work': Physical Culture in the Evolution of the British Army, 1860-1920* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012), 63-64.

31 Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 45.

32 *Infantry Training 1914*, 3.

33 *Infantry Training 1914*, 114-116.

34 Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford: Osprey, 2013), 148-150.

35 Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander*, 110; Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 45-46.

36 *Infantry Training 1914*, 80-83. *Daily News*, 19 September 1914.

37 *Evening Telegram*, 3 September 1914. "Musketry" was the term used in 1914 for what is now called weapons handling.

38 O'Brien, Out of a Clear Sky," 410; *Evening Telegram*, 8 September 1914.

39 British military experts found that "in field conditions crack shots did little better than soldiers with average shooting skills." Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle*, 45. An exception to this were soldiers employed as snipers. Specialized training for snipers was instituted by the British Army in France in September 1915. Martin Pegler, *Sniping in the Great War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008), 120-127.

40 *Musketry Regulations Part I* (London: HMSO, 1909), 254-255, 272.

41 Frost, *A Blue Puttee at War*, 45; *Infantry Training 1914*, 2, 10.

42 O'Brien, "Out of a Clear Sky," 415.