

Where Terra Nova's Sons Met the Might of Germany!

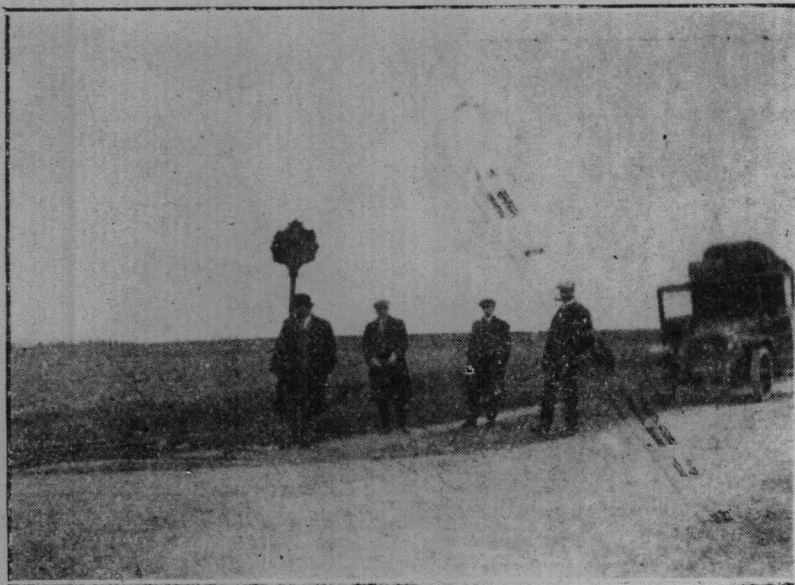
The Battle of Beaumont Hamel, July 1st, 1916

By No. 38 L.-C. John J. Ryan, Royal Nfld. Regiment

(This splendid article is taken from the Evening Telegram of June 30th, 1919.)

"Those who lived and those who died,
They were one in noble pride—
Of desperate endeavour, and duty nobly done."

ON the night of the 29th June, officers, non-commissioned officers, observers and runners grouped around the war map spread on the table at Company Headquarters. Captain Ledingham pointed out the important parts of the German front to be stormed by the Division. I can well remember the instructions given us. We were to start from St. John's Road (the new trench built by ourselves) and cross two support trenches and the firing line, then pass through the gaps in our own wire and walk across No Man's Land. The first and second system of Hun defences were supposed to have been captured by the other brigades, we then had to cross the first on foot bridges carried by the troops. Passing over Station Road and the second line, we would halt near Pursieux Road whilst our artillery ham-



Ingoyghem—where our boys did their last fighting just before Armistice was signed.

mered the third system, our objective; and then on lifting the barrage we were to go right in and fight for its possession. It looked easy on the map—quite easy.

A farewell concert was given at Brigade Headquarters, and on the last night of June, when the sun had hidden its face from the horrors of the battle front, the Newfoundland Regiment, nine hundred strong, swung around the zig-zag roads from Louvencourt to the line. The French villagers watched us go. Some cried but others cheered and wished us the luck that France was hoping for. Never before did the battalion look finer; splendid officers and stalwart men fully equipped and cleared for action. Marching through the intervening villages, we reached the suburbs of Maily at dark. In this hamlet the boys had many a good night's rest, but it was now in the melting pot of German destruction. A great shell screamed overhead as we tramped out across the fields so as to give the former communicating lines a wide berth. The Hun batteries were pouring showers of shrapnel on the main road, and our own "big uns" sent over an occasional leviathan to clear the atmosphere. On reaching the communication trench (Tipperary Avenue) we had to halt for quite a long while, as other regiments on their way in had blocked the entrance and it was impossible to get through for some time. This waiting in such a dangerous position was very trying to the nerves. At any moment the enemy was likely to start a bombardment and cause serious casualties, as shells were bursting none too far away. It was somewhere about midnight before we settled down to our jumping-off place in St. John's Road.

The night was cold, damp and extremely uncomfortable. The heavy artillery steadily shelled the communications of the enemy, but nevertheless an ominous silence was hanging over the men of the Newfoundland Regiment. No projectiles of any description touched St. John's Road during the night, yet we longed for the heat of the morning. A plentiful supply of water was brought in, and we took an occasional drink with bread and canned meat. Few



Statue of the leaning Virgin at Albert.

of us were inclined to sleep. It was the last night on earth for hundreds.

With the break of the day small guns joined in the scrap and dropped some shells on the Huns' first system. Restless and impatient we waited for the hour to strike. At seven o'clock our artillery commenced to blow up the whole German front. At eight the fire had increased to a thunderous crashing of steel and explosives and the ground shook with the terrific cannonading. For sixty minutes this avalanche of death kept up its strength. At nine o'clock the big mine went skywards, taking with it a village and many yards of Hun trench. The Royal Fusiliers, who formed part of the attacking force on the left, moved forward with machine guns to occupy the crater, but were held up by a murderous fire from the enemy, and the Welsh Borderers, Inskilling and Lancashire Fusiliers, with their supporting battalions, were practically annihilated by the deadly fire of the enemy. An officer rushed back into our traverse, his head and face mud and blood. He told us the attack was a failure, that the regiments were wiped out, but the orders came down the line "Newfoundlanders Advance." We scrambled out and kept together as best we could. My eyes were fixed on the black burnt hillside where lay the German lines unconquered. I hardly noticed myself going over the ridge and crossing three trenches. Bullets were whizzing past and cracking round everywhere. I glanced towards the left. The sections were going on in splendid formation. I was so excited that I didn't



Where the big German offensive of April 1918 ended. Their object was to reach the Channel ports.

realize a wall of uncut wire was barring our path. I can remember the wire-cutters working like niggers to get through, but one died and hung on the wire. The others were peppered with bullets, and the sections came piling in, but we had no means of advancing. The "typewriters" were too quick. The men dropped like wheat to the scythe. The German artillery was now in the fray. A great projectile plunged into our group, and when the smoke cleared, but three or four of us lived to crawl out of the hell. The gaps to our right and left were choked with dead. The high grass was strewn with badly wounded men, and shell holes contained two, three and four. The spraying with

shrapnel of No Man's Land was responsible for a great many of the killed.

I went through the firing line and met the Colonel. He told me to hang round in case of a counter stroke. Then the Germans gave us a taste of the gunfire we had been giving them for a week. Traverses went up under the smash of high explosives, and men who tried to get back with their wounds, never crossed that line of death. Life had never seemed so dear to me as it did at that hour, but there was no getting away from it. When the fire had decreased, some of our boys managed to find the lines and get through to a first aid station. Others reached part of the way and dropped, crying out for stretcher bearers. Lieut. Frost is credited with having gone out two or three times and carried in men on his back; while Private Jack Reardigan worked like a trojan to get the badly wounded out of No Man's Land. All day the Huns shelled our lines making the rescue work hard and dangerous. A fleet of ambulances rushed through the villages with the more serious cases, but many died before help could be given them.

Capt. Bert Butler assembled the remnants of the battalion and put us in a dugout near Constitutional Hill. This trench was partly levelled by gunfire. G.M.S. Cleary lay dead about half way through it, but nobody dared wait to remove his body as the shelling was perpetual.

All night explosives were bursting in the saps and the front line, but a scattered unwounded straggler returned from the shell holes. Burying parties brought in a few of the dead and placed them in the trenches for identification. This work was continued for days. On the second and third, rain poured out of the heavens partly filling the lines and making our work of rescue a hardship.

The battle on the right was kept going strong, and when the sun again made its appearance the glittering bayonets were quite discernable a mile or two distant. With a pair of binoculars we could see the bombing fights between British and German, yet the artillery showed very little activity.

Quite a large number of our dead were still out in front when we were relieved by the 48th Division and sent



L/C. Christian's grave near Boloune-Hon. W. F. Coaker leaning over the grave

back to Englebelem. This village was evacuated by the inhabitants on the eve of the battle and now lay in ruins. Signs of a hasty departure of the inhabitants were quite evident, but one old gray-haired peasant refused to leave, though ordered to do so many times by the French police.

It was here Lieut. Owen Steele received his fatal wounds. A large shell having burst in a barn a few yards from where he was standing outside the officers' mess. Here also we were visited by Sir Almyer Hunter Weston, commanding the 8th Army Corps, who spoke about our day in the battle saying, "Newfoundlanders, you have done better than the best." Truly, we did what we could, but not a man expected such a glowing tribute after so terrible a failure. General De Lisle and staff are rumored to have said, "They went as if on parade until they could get no further." Though our English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh friends did their utmost, greatest praise was reserved for the Newfoundlanders. It is England's way of doing things. She suffered seventy-five per cent. of all casualties, yet we are lauded to the skies by her newspapers, and the home regiments worked silently for the cause victorious.

After being transferred to the huts in Maily Wood, the remnants of the battalion were again sent into the line, reinforced by a small draft from Rouen. Remaining there a couple of days, we removed to Acheux. The work of reorganization was quickly pushed, and in ten days the little body of Newfoundlanders marched back through Louvencourt, cheered by the villagers. We were leaving Beaumont Hamel for ever.

George Neal,

Limited

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