

REMINISCENCES OF BEAUMONT HAMEL

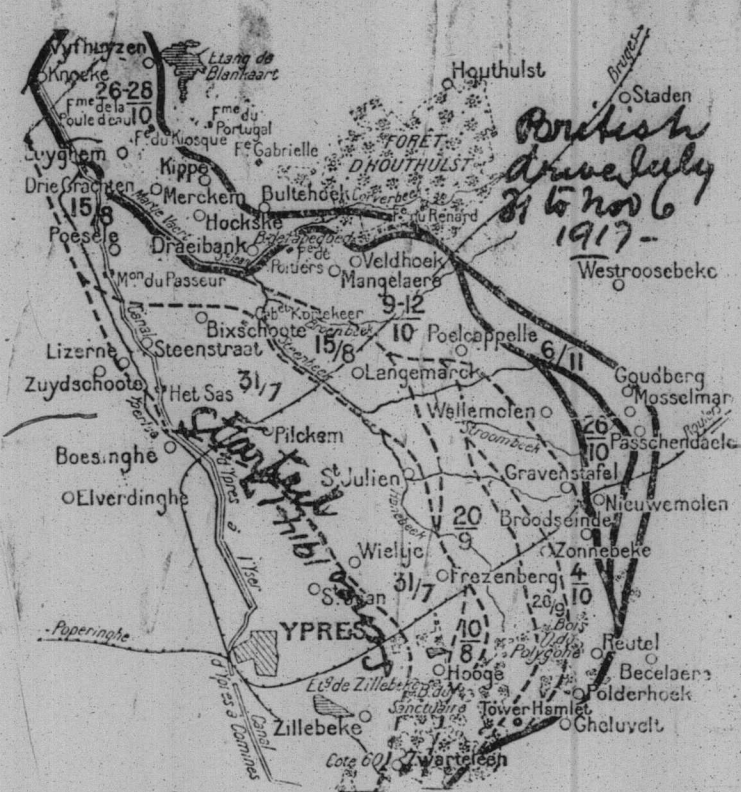
BY AN EYE WITNESS

IS it not a singular coincidence that whilst our sister Dominion gayly celebrates the 1st day of July as its anniversary of confederation, we Newfoundlanders commemorate this same day, sorrowfully perhaps, yet proudly, in honour of those brave lads of "Ours," who against overwhelming odds faced death and won imperishable glory for their Native Land?

Many accounts have been published enumerating the achievements of the Newfoundland Regiment on July 1st, 1916; survivors have explained the attack and related their personal experiences; some few have since traversed the ground over which the boys fought, and are better able to understand the difficulties encountered in the attack; so in reality apart from deeds of personal bravery, little remains to be told.

We are informed that this thrust at Beaumont Hamel was unsuccessful, in that the battalions employed did not attain their allotted objectives. But are we all familiar with the direct causes of this reverse? And further are we all aware of the invaluable tactical knowledge gained from the results of these operations, the subsequent employment of which brought unqualified success to British arms? It is my intention to particularize these issues, after summarizing the preparation of our Regiment for this great battle, and briefly outlining the deeds of the day.

Those who survived these Somme days, well remember the immense preparations in the British lines for the opening of the "Big Drive." Our boys looked upon the



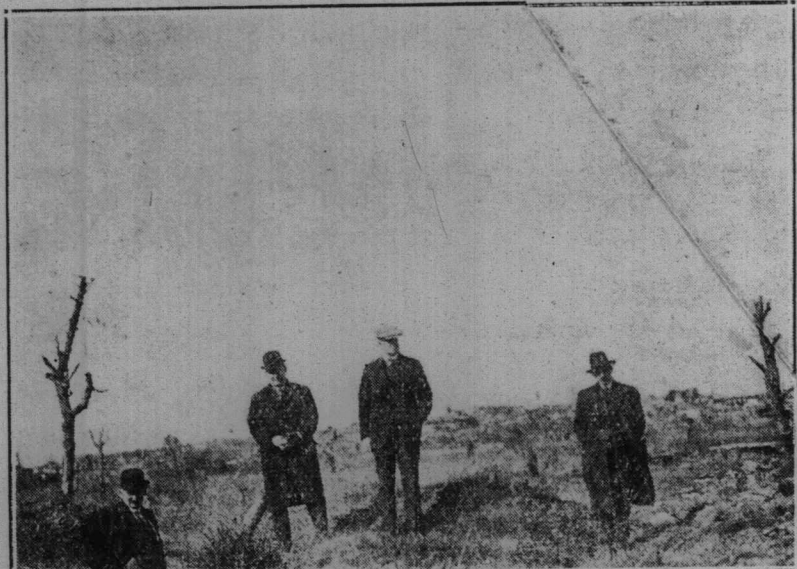
Map of British drive, July-November, 1917.

and each soldier was made acquainted with the position of wire entanglements, and other obstacles which lay in his path.

The preparations of the supporting artillery were correspondingly complete, and never before were guns so densely massed, nor was ammunition so profusely abundant. Every calibre and every range, from the French 75 mm. to the huge fifteen inch gun. Two of the latter were emplaced to the south of Auchon-Villers. As the infantry viewed these mammoth creatures discharging their ton-weights, they were impressed with a feeling of entire confidence in this branch of the service, so essential to the successful pursuance of their plans.

The Bosche had not been idle. Months before he had discovered through his espionage system that the Allied Armies were preparing for a grand offensive in Picardy. As the season advanced and our preparations became more noticeable, so the wily Hun became more ingenious and complete in his counter-preparations. Deep dug-outs and concrete machine-gun emplacements were constructed, and masses of wire entanglements were erected.

Three days before the attack a unit from the Newfoundland Regiment raided the enemy lines in front of Beaumont Hamel for purposes of identification. This party met with heavy opposition but pushed on right up to the front line trench, effecting a gap in the wire by the aid



The trench where Col. Forbes Robinson with the eight heroes held Monchy. Mr. Coaker is standing in the trench.

forthcoming operations with much favour. It was to be their first big part in the great struggle. They would soon have an opportunity to test their metal, and each man was satisfied that he would do his part in maintaining the confidence placed in the Regiment by the Mother Country and the Home Land. Physically they were in the pink of condition, and everywhere was noticed the splendid "cameraderie" which so happily existed throughout the battalion.

"Like baited eagles having lately bathed,
They didn't care a damn for anything."

Comfortably billeted in the town of Louvencourt in the reserve area, all patronized its cafes and restaurants "in bands for troops," more particularly of course on "pay nights." The surrounding country afforded excellent opportunities for practising the attack, and every man became thoroughly familiar with its minutest detail.

Their colleagues in the fight were the Worcesters, Hants, and Essex, the four battalions forming the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division. These three, were line battalions of the regular army, yet our troops compared favourably with these tried warriors of old England. Each battalion rotatorily occupied the front line, supports, and reserve. Whilst those in the rear rested and trained, the advanced troops were engaged in digging saps for jumping off trenches, and in performing other excavating tasks. A mine shaft was constructed four hundred yards in length, leading directly under the German front line. A



The burnt barn Vieille, where 13 of our lads were burnt alive. The four figures are standing on the ruins.

huge mine was laid in front of Beaumont Hamel in readiness for zero hour.

During the month of June, the officers, N.C.O.'s, and men studied the defenses opposite their sector of the line, familiarizing themselves with all landmarks which might be of assistance to them in keeping direction. Their topographical knowledge of the German trenches and gun positions was complete, and the airmen daily supplied them with photographs of any freshly prepared enemy fortifications. The objective was named as the third line,



Auchonvillers—where a few of our gallant lads sleep.

of a torpedo. They showered their bombs upon the occupants of the trench killing many of them. The raiders met with several casualties in this counter-attack, but the enemy suffered three to their one. The actions of this party were highly credible, and especially the heroic way they rescued all of their wounded under intense fire from the German lines.

On the 28th day of June surplus kit was handed in to the Quartermaster Stores, and in fitting equipment the Regiment awaited orders for the march to the trenches. Presently however a message was received that plans had been changed, and the attack postponed for forty-eight hours. Meanwhile a fresh draft arrived and was posted to company. Although without previous active service, these "young bloods" were eager for the fray and seemed glad of this early opportunity to prove their worth.

Dusk on the 30th June found the Newfoundland battalion marching out from Louvencourt, with everybody in good spirits, and a little of the good spirit (the ration) in most of them. The French populace was one of the main plans for the morrow, and they cheerfully had the colonials "au revoir" and "bon soirs" with a prayer for the safe return to the town in which they had so often been billeted. The battalion marched straight to the trenches and occupied for the night the deep dug-outs in the support trench called St. John's Wood Road. Although they knew that on the morrow he would be subjected to a supreme test, yet all confidently and coolly awaited dawn. Even the least optimistic believed that ere another gun had set, the caribou would leave its trail through Beaumont Hamel, across the Puisieux and Serre roads, into the villages of Miraumont and Grandcourt.

The "ten per cent" remained at Auchon-Villers, with in easy reach in the event of requirement, and they carried the breakfast tea from the cookers to the battalion in the dug-outs.

Before dawn the British artillery on a front of sixty kilometres opened out with unprecedented volume, illuminating the surrounding country for miles in a most impressive and spectacular display. The harder the guns pounded the more confident the boys became, and they cheerfully anticipated zero hour. At 6 a.m. the mine was exploded, tons of earth and debris were driven hundreds of feet into the air. This was the signal for the advanced battalions to attack, and over they went with a cheer. Almost instantly a barrage of enemy machine guns burst forth, and before they had crossed half the distance their ranks became seriously depleted. On they struggled nevertheless, undaunted and hopeful of success, but ere they reached the enemy front line their strengths had melted away, further offence being out of the question.

Brigade Headquarters in Fethart Street received this report somewhat despondently, and when a second battalion tried and met with a similar fate, the task looked hopeless. But as Beaumont Hamel was in a commanding position, and resistance from this stronghold was holding up the attack for kilometres to the North and South, it was considered to be worth one more chance, and that chance fell to the Newfoundland Regiment. Company commanders were informed as to the situation, and they imparted this knowledge to all ranks. For the first time our boys realized what they were up against. Disappointed but not dismayed, they ground their teeth for a supreme effort.



The Lion Monument, Waterloo. Mr. Coaker is descending the steps. Most of the photos shown were taken by Rev. Major Nangle.

Ah! It was not to be. What had been impossible for two battalions was not to be possible for a third. Renewed obstacles presented themselves. The enemy had been encouraged by their temporary success and offered more stubborn resistance. Our boys had an additional three hundred yards to cover, from St. John's Wood Road to the front line, which gave the enemy a better chance of enfilading them with machine guns.

Zero came. "Right to it" was their cry, as they "jumped the top." The enemy artillery opened an annihilating barrage. The machine guns belched out from behind ruins and from the mouths of hidden pits. Not a moment's hesitation. With grim determination they struggled on. Whole platoons were wiped out with a single shell. Sections fell in line torn by machine gun bullets.

"They attacked regardless of loss, moving forward in extended order, wave behind wave. It was a magnificent exhibition of disciplined courage."

—Bernhardt.

You know the rest. How a single man found himself the sole survivor of a platoon, an N.C.O. in charge of a company. All officers had become casualties. A few reached the enemy barbed wire, which strange to relate was in many places still intact, only to be shot down trying to sever the strands with hand wire-cutters. At night the 58 survivors of 811 men reached our lines in an exhausted condition. The attack had failed, the impossible could not be accomplished, but glorious had been the attempt. The



Gravesend Cemetery where several of our heroes sleep—each figure is standing at a Newfoundland soldier's grave.

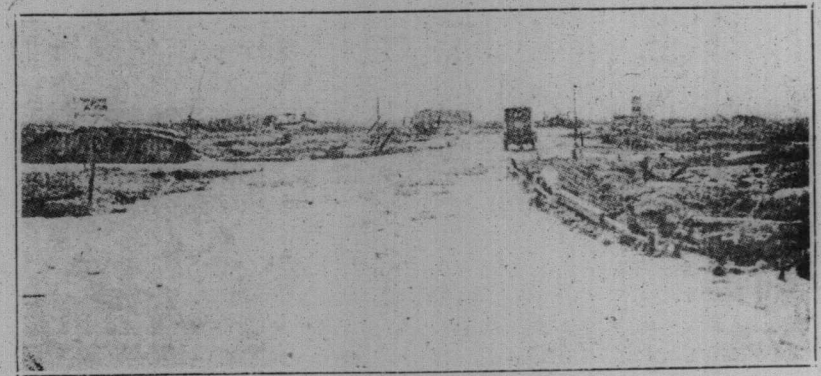
story of the noble steadiness and courage of these valiant lads will live forever.

"The heroism shown has never been surpassed."

—Sir Douglas Haig.

"I salute you individually, you have done better than the best."

—Sir Archibald Hunter-Weston.



Vindictive Road, Passchendaele.

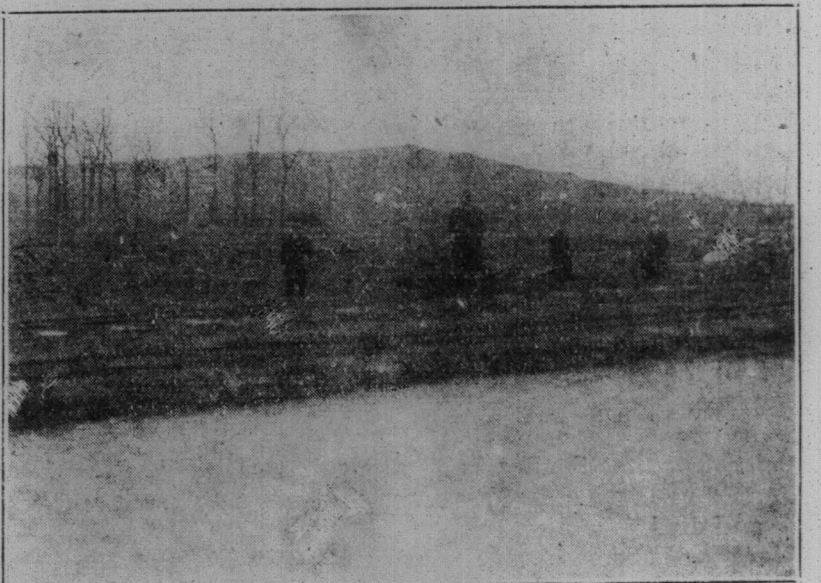
Those who have not familiarized themselves with these opening Somme battles, may have imagined some local causes of failure. But not so, the causes were general. Each battalion along the front met with a similar fate, and the casualties of the British Army on July 1st alone were upwards of 100,000. Up to that time the science of attack had not kept pace with the science of defence, and only when other methods and other tactics were successfully employed, was the science of former principles truly brought home to those responsible.

The five outstanding causes of failure for which remedies were soon enacted may be outlined as follows:—

First:—The element of surprise was completely lost. A week's previous bombardment had indicated to the Bosche that an attack was soon to be launched on a wide front. This gave the enemy every opportunity to make counter preparations, and to move numerous reserves of troops from other fronts. In fact this method of artillery employment was only an abrupt way of whispering to the enemy,—"In a few days we are going to attack, look out for we are coming in strength." Notice the difference on the 20th of November at Cambrai when a surprise attack was launched with grand success.

Second:—The creeping barrage had never been tried. In those days the guns bombarded, then ceased or lifted to back areas, while the troops went over. In later battles the infantry kept pace with the barrage, which afforded them a continuous protection in their advance. Even a few months later at Gueudecourt, our own Regiment without previous preparation, under a protective barrage tasted the sweetness of victory.

Third:—The practice of troops advancing in waves one behind the other was often glorious, but proved disadvantageous from a military point of view. The method finally adopted when attacking without supporting barrage was learned from the Bosche himself. Springing forward by short rushes, in one's and two's, under cover of each other's fire, without artillery support, won for the Royal Newfoundland Regiment the commanding heights of Keiberg in September, 1918.



Mont Kemmel in the rear.

Fourth:—The smoke barrage had not yet been evolved. The decisive battles of the war were fought under cover of smoke. For every one shell of H.E., two of smoke burst on the enemy parapets, which enabled the troops to creep forward unobserved, and corner the villain in his holes. This solved the danger of crossing clear open fields in full view of machine gunners and snipers.

Fifth:—Shrapnel was shown to be ineffective in destroying wire entanglements. Later H.E. was used with good results. Finally the consumer of all obstructions, the invincible tank, made its appearance, reviving once again open warfare, and the advances of the Allied Armies was no longer measured in yards but in miles.

It is easy to see it now, but the older methods could not have been proved faulty until duly tried and tested. Nor was it known that the changed methods would prove successful, until they too were equally tried and tested. But it was on that day shown for once and for all, that steady troops entrenched in prepared positions, with a clear field of fire, are capable of withstanding the onslaughts of superior troops, under conditions similar to those I have explained.

Those who survive look back on that day four years ago, with reverence and commemoration for their comrades who fell, and although their loss is deeply mourned, yet it is some comfort to know that they did their duty unflinchingly, and with a courage that has never been surpassed, and great shall be their reward.

It is also gratifying to know that it has been decided to erect a memorial on the field of Beaumont Hamel, in honour of those brave lads who have crossed the Great Divide. It seems to me that this place above all others should be commemorated, representing as it does the spot where so many of the best lay asleep, and where the Regiment gained undying fame in its first great encounter.