

C A N A D A R E M E M B E R S

THE 1ST NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT AND THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME



Canadian soldiers returning from the front at the Somme in 1916. Library and Archives Canada / PA-832

Many Canadians know July 1st as Canada Day. However, in Newfoundland and Labrador, the day has an additional and more solemn meaning. There, the day is also known as Memorial Day and marks the anniversary of the fighting at Beaumont-Hamel during the First World War.

NEWFOUNDLAND GOES TO WAR

During the time of the First World War (1914-18), Newfoundland was a dominion of the British Empire and not yet a part of Canada. Once Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Newfoundland – like Canada – was automatically at war. The people of Newfoundland responded with a great outpouring of patriotism and many rushed to enlist. From a total population of about 240,000, more than 12,000 Newfoundlanders would join up during the war and almost as many would try but be rejected for service.

The 1st Newfoundland Regiment was quickly assembled and hastily trained, with the first recruits sent overseas in October of 1914 to become a unit of the British Army. They would become known as the 'Blue Puttees' because of the colour of the uniform leggings they wore on their lower legs.

After seeing action in the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey in late 1915, the regiment was withdrawn and the Newfoundlanders sent to the Western Front in France in the spring of 1916.

THE WESTERN FRONT IN 1916

Following the opening battles of 1914, the First World War in Western Europe quickly bogged down into trench warfare with the opposing armies dug in, facing one another from a complex series of trenches across the blasted 'No Man's Land,' defended by lookouts, barbed wire, and guns. Artillery, snipers, grenades, mines, machine guns, and sickness took a great toll.

The generals could see only one way to end the stalemate – brutal frontal assaults in the face of intense fire to break the enemy defences. The Allied plan for 1916 was to make the "Big Push," and the Somme was chosen as the site for a joint French and British assault. It would be on the first day of the Battle of the Somme – near the village of Beaumont-Hamel in northern France – that the 1st Newfoundland Regiment would enter the action.

BATTLE OF BEAUMONT-HAMEL

At 7:30 in the morning on July 1, thousands of British and French troops began their shoulder-to-shoulder advance across No Man's Land in broad daylight toward the German positions to open the Battle of the Somme. The result would be slaughter – more than 57,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers were killed, wounded or missing – the heaviest combat losses ever suffered by the British Army in a single day.



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The sector of the front in Beaumont-Hamel where the 1st Newfoundland Regiment would see action was supposed to be taken by surprise, but the Germans knew the attack was coming. In addition, the initial Allied bombardment failed to damage most of the German defences.

At about 9:15 a.m., the Newfoundlanders – forming part of the 29th British Division – attacked from a support trench nicknamed ‘St. John’s Road.’ They attacked from this trench, which was actually behind the front line, because of the sheer number of soldiers involved in earlier attacks who were dead or wounded and clogging the front trenches. This meant that the Newfoundlanders had to traverse more than 200 metres in full view of the enemy before they even made it to the Allies’ own front line. Once they made it to No Man’s Land, they were then expected to cross through tangles of shattered barbed wire to reach the enemy trenches more than 500 metres down the slope.

As the Newfoundlanders advanced toward the enemy, there was a tree halfway down the slope that marked the spot where German fire seemed to become particularly intense. This gnarled tree was nicknamed the ‘danger tree’ by the Newfoundland troops and it marked the spot where many of them would fall that morning. As they walked into the hail of machine gun and artillery fire, it was said that many of them tucked their chins in, almost like they were walking into the teeth of a blizzard back home. But this time it was not snow flying all around them – the 1st Newfoundland Regiment would be practically

decimated in less than half an hour of intense German artillery and machine gun fire.

July 1st would only be the first day of more than four brutal months of fighting during the Battle of the Somme, a campaign in which Canada would also see significant action. By the time it was all over, the Allies would have more than 650,000 soldiers killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, and both the Allies and the Germans would each lose about 200,000 lives. For this incredible cost, the Allies moved the front line forward by only about 10 kilometres.

SACRIFICE

The losses sustained by the 1st Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916, were staggering. Of the 801 Newfoundlanders who went into battle that morning, only 68 were able to answer the roll call the next day, with 255 dead, 386 wounded and 91 missing. The dead included 14 sets of brothers, including four lieutenants from the Ayers family of St. John’s.

The Newfoundlanders’ sacrifice did not go unnoticed on the front lines. The commander of the 29th British Division said of the actions of the 1st Newfoundland Regiment on that July morning:

“It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further.”

