

Beaumont Hamel

Beaumont-Hamel is situated near the northern end of the forty five kilometre front to be assaulted by the French and British. The attack, originally scheduled for June 29, 1916, following a hitherto unprecedented five-day artillery bombardment, was postponed by two days to July 1, 1916, partly on account of inclement weather, partly to allow more time for the artillery preparation.



At Beaumont-Hamel, the 29th British Division, with its three Infantry Brigades, the 86th, the 87th and the 88th, faced particularly formidable defences, resolutely manned by the experienced troops of the 119th (Reserve) Infantry Regiment (a part of the Wurttemberg 26th (Reserve Division)), who had been manning this part of the line for nearly 20 months. It was nevertheless confidently expected that the artillery bombardment would have extensively degraded both the German defences and morale. In reality, although considerable damage was done to the trenches, in many places the barbed wire remained relatively intact. More particularly the defenders, protected within deep dugouts, were largely unscathed.

The plan at Beaumont-Hamel required the four initial assaulting battalions from the 86th and 87th Brigades to move up to the German wire by 7:30a.m. - the designated Zero hour. In conjunction with the infantry moving forward, the heavy and medium artillery bombardment onto the German first line was scheduled to lift onto other targets, retaining only shrapnel and mortar fire on the enemy forward positions. Simultaneously, as the leading infantry left their trenches to arrive at the German wire prior to their assault, a powerful mine with 18,500 kg. of explosives, was fired at 7:20 a.m. under a German strong point on the Hawthorn Ridge (to the immediate north of Y Ravine).

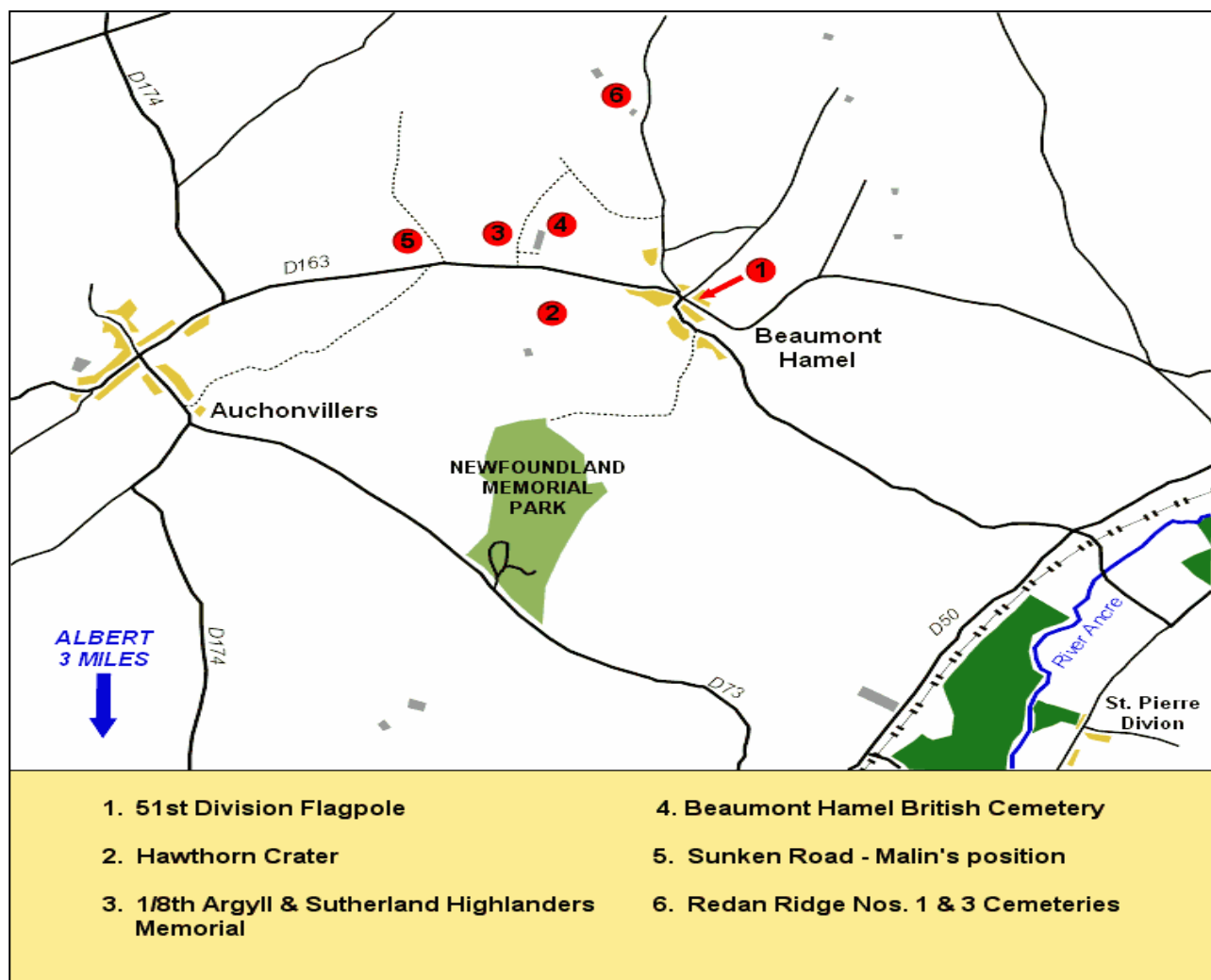
The intention was to destroy a major enemy strong point, to seize the crater rim and dominate the enemy trenches. However, the German reaction was so swift that the troops of the 2nd R Fusiliers of the 86th Brigade, detailed to take the crater, found themselves fighting for survival and unable to provide the intended support.

Catastrophically, the firing of the mine forewarned the Germans that the attack was probably imminent, and the troops of the 119th (Reserve) Infantry Regiment deployed from their dugouts into the firing line, scarcely hampered by the field artillery shrapnel barrage. The battalions,

moving up for the assault and still only part of the way across No Man's Land, were subjected to well directed small arms fires from riflemen and machine guns.

Concurrently the German artillery, which was relatively unscathed by the British counter battery fire, directed an intense barrage on the advancing troops and the British lines and communications. This added to the devastation in No Man's Land, caught the following battalions, wrought havoc in the trenches and almost paralysed movement through the communication trenches. For the battalions caught in No Man's Land as they moved forward to their intended assault positions, the situation was compounded at 7:30 a.m. when the shrapnel barrage lifted 100 yards (90m.) off the German forward line, and continued lifting 100 yards every two minutes toward the German second and third lines. Excepting the right flank, where elements of the 1st Inniskillings did break into and through the German 1st to 3rd line, the initial assault foundered at, or short of, the German wire.

The plan called for the second wave of the attack (the remaining two battalions from each leading Brigade) to leave the British forward line at 7:30 a.m. as the assaulting battalions reached the German wire. On the left flank those of the 86th Brigade were delayed by the German counter barrage *"and it was not until 7:55 a.m. that they advanced."* On the right flank, taking in the area now occupied by the Memorial site and some of the Mary Redan to the immediate south, in the words of the 87th Brigade War Diary *"The 1st KOSB and 1st Border Regiment left their assembly trenches at about 7:35 a.m. and advancing under very heavy machine gun fire failed to get as far as the leading battalions with the exception of the leading sections of the 1st Border Regiment which got as far as the German wire."*



Newfoundland Advance

At Divisional Headquarters the commander (Major General Beauvoir de Lisle) and his staff were trying to unravel numerous and confusing messages coming back from observation posts, contact aircraft and the two leading brigades. The indications were that some troops had broken into and gone beyond the German first line. He therefore ordered the 88th Brigade, which was in reserve, to send forward two battalions to support the right attack. At 8:45 a.m. the 1st Newfoundland and 1st Essex received orders to move forward independently, occupy the enemy's first trench and clear forward to Station Road (behind the enemy 3rd line).

The original plan for the Newfoundlanders (and 1st Essex) was to move forward about 10:00 a.m. through the troops of the initial assault Brigades and take the third objective " *the enemy's third line trenches on the GRANDCOURT RIDGE.*" But now, in the words of the Newfoundlanders' War Diary, they received the following instructions: - "0845 - Received orders on the telephone to move forward in conjunction with 1st Essex Regt and occupy the enemy's first trench—our objective being from point 89 to just north of point 60 and work forward to Station Road clearing the enemy trenches—and move as soon as possible. Asked Brigade if enemy's 1st trench has been taken and received reply to the effect that the situation was not cleared up. Asked Brigade if we were to move off to the attack independently of Essex Regt and received reply in the affirmative."

The Newfoundlanders were situated in St. John's Road, a support trench, 200 metres behind the British forward line and out of sight of the enemy. Because the communication trenches were congested with dead and wounded and under shell fire, the Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hadow, decided to move immediately into attack formation and advance.

The Essex Regiment, on their right flank, were visible to German positions at Thiepval and were therefore compelled to move up through the congested trenches; they did not get into position until 10:50 a.m. The Newfoundlanders were on their own, supported only by some mortar and machine gun fire.

The Newfoundlanders started their advance at 9:15 a.m., moving in their pre-rehearsed formation with A and B Companies leading in lines of platoons in file or single file at 40 pace intervals and 25 paces between sections, followed at 100 yard distance by C and D Companies in similar formation. As they breasted the skyline behind the British first line, they were effectively the only troops moving on the battlefield and were subjected to the full wrath of the 119th (Reserve) Infantry Regiment manning the positions ahead and the German artillery.

At 9:45 a.m. Lieutenant Colonel Hadow, who had witnessed the destruction of much of his Battalion from his Headquarters in Sap 4, reported to the Brigade Commander (based in a nearby dugout) that the advance had failed. Within 15 to 20 minutes of leaving St. John's Road trench approximately 85% of those who had started forward were dead, dying or wounded. Only one other battalion (the 10th West Yorks at Fricourt) suffered more heavily on July 1, 1916. For many men, however, it was far from over. Isolated survivors continued to engage the Germans from No Man's Land and about 40 men, taken under command of a Captain G.E. Malcolm of 1st KOSB, attempted to continue the attack but were finally stopped just short of the enemy line. Of this Captain Malcolm, who was wounded, later reported, "*I should like to congratulate the Newfoundland Regiment on their extreme steadiness under trying conditions.*"

The tragedy had yet to play out in full for the 1st Essex. By the time they were in position the Divisional Commander had ordered a cessation of all attacks. However, due to numerous communication difficulties, the message did not reach them. The two lead companies attempted to advance and suffered about 250 casualties before their Commanding Officer called a halt.

Few of the wounded lying in No Man's Land could attempt to retire to safety before nightfall, and many either died where they lay, or were subsequently killed by artillery fire or watchful enemy riflemen and machine gunners. Several wounded were not recovered until four nights later. Meantime, the remnants of the Battalion, along with the reserve that had been held back, continued to hold a part of the line against expected German counter attacks until relieved on July

6, incurring further casualties in the process, including at least four officers on the afternoon of July 1. When they left the line on July 6 to billets in Engelbelmer the Battalion's fighting strength numbered 168 other ranks. Here, on July 7, Lieutenant O.W. Steele was wounded by shellfire and died the following day.

The Newfoundlanders manned the line again from July 14 to 17, by then up to a strength of eleven officers and 260 riflemen. On July 27, with the rest of the Division, they entrained for billets at Candas, by which stage Battalion strength was up to 554.

The situation of men lying in No Man's Land was aggravated by a shiny tin triangle each wore on his back. These were to enable identification by the liaison aircraft and artillery observers, but for men lying wounded, or in such cover as they could find, they also signalled any movement to the enemy.

The Casualties

The casualties sustained on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme totalled 57,470, of which 19,240 were fatal. The Newfoundland Regiment Battalion ration strength on June 30, 1916, was 1044 all ranks, including administrative staff and attached personnel. Actual fighting strength was about 929 all ranks, of whom twenty six officers and 772 other ranks deployed into the trenches.

A further officer and 33 other ranks were attached to the Brigade Mortar and Machine Gun Companies while 14 officers and 83 other ranks were held back as reserve and for special duties. So far as can be ascertained, 22 officers and 758 other ranks were directly involved in the advance. Of these, all the officers and slightly under 658 other ranks became casualties, but exact figures are not available as casualties were reported for the day as a whole. Of the approximately 800 men who went forward only about 110 survived unscathed, of whom only sixty eight were available for roll call the following day.

The Battalion's War Diary on July 7 states that on July 1 the overall casualties for the Battalion were 14 officers and 296 other ranks killed, died of wounds or missing believed killed, and that 12 officers and 362 other ranks were wounded, a total of 684 all ranks out of a fighting strength of about 929. About 14 of the wounded subsequently died from their wounds. Afterward, the Divisional Commander was to write of the Newfoundlanders effort: *"It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault failed of success because dead men can advance no further."*

The Newfoundland Regiment after Beaumont-Hamel

In the weeks and months following the attack, as the surviving officers wrote letters of condolence to families and relatives in Newfoundland, the Battalion was steadily brought back to full strength. Six weeks later they were beating off a German gas attack in Flanders. Subsequently they distinguished themselves in a number of battles; back on the Somme at Gueudecourt in October 1916; in April 1917, at Monchy-le-Preux during the Battle of Arras, where they lost 485 men in a day but checked a German attack despite overwhelming odds; then in November 1917 at Masnières-Marcoing during the Battle of Cambrai where they heroically stood their ground although outflanked; then at Bailleul stemming the German advance in April 1918.

Following a period out of the line providing the guard force for General Headquarters at Montreuil, they joined the 28th Brigade of the 9th (Scottish) Division and were in action again at Ledeghem and beyond in the advances of the Last Hundred Days. It was in these last days of the war that Private Tommy Ricketts of the Regiment became the youngest soldier of the war (he was a few months short of his 18th birthday) to win the highest award for valour, the Victoria Cross.

The Newfoundlanders acquired a reputation second to none as a Battalion that could be entirely depended upon whatever the cost. They did not complain, they had faith in what they were doing and they did it with courage, skill and resolution. In recognition of their exceptional valour and prowess King George V bestowed on them after the end of the Battle of Cambrai the prefix Royal, renaming them as the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. This was the only time in the entire war that

this honour was given, and only the third time in the history of the British Army that it has been given during a state of war. It was a fitting tribute to a very remarkable body of men.

The esteem in which the Newfoundlanders were held may be illustrated by a spontaneous tribute. In October 1918, the Battalion was temporarily held up outside the Belgium hamlet of Steenbeck. From the right flank a mounted officer came galloping toward them.

He proved to be Brigadier General Freyberg, VC. When within hailing distance he shouted, "Who are you?" "Newfoundlanders" was the reply. "Thank God, my left flank is safe," exclaimed the Brigadier as he wheeled his horse.

Beaumont-Hamel after July 1916

After July 1916, the Beaumont-Hamel front remained relatively quiet while the great battles of the Somme raged to the south. Then, as the final act in the Somme battles, on November 13, 1916, with the opening of the Battle of the Ancre, Beaumont-Hamel was assaulted by the 51st (Highland) Division. Within the day, all the 29th Division objectives of July 1 had been taken along with a great many German prisoners, and the fighting moved east onto Beaucourt Ridge.

The area of the Memorial Site then became a rear area with troops lodged in the former German dugouts and a camp was established in the vicinity of the present Y Ravine Cemetery (which was also established in the same period). With the German withdrawal in March 1917 to the Hindenburg (or Siegfried) line, about 30 kilometres from Beaumont-Hamel, the battlefield salvage parties moved in, many dugouts were closed off and initial efforts were probably made to restore some of the land to agriculture.

However, in March 1918, the German *Kaiserschlacht* offensive was here checked on exactly the same battle lines as before. Until the Battle of Amiens and the German withdrawal in late August 1918, the protagonists confronted each other over the same ground, although the only actions were those of routine front line warfare—raids, patrols and artillery harassment.

The landscape architect who designed the sites and supervised their construction, was Mr. R.H.K. Cochiu, a native of Holland living in St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland. The caribous were the work of the English sculptor, Basil Gotto. He also executed the statue of the "Fighting Newfoundlander," which Sir Edward Bowring gifted to the people of St. John's.

The site contains three cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; that of Y Ravine, Hawthorn Ridge No. 2 and the unusual mass burial site of Hunter's Cemetery. Near the entrance is situated a Memorial to the 29th British Division. Of particular note, overlooking Y Ravine, is the Memorial to the 51st (Highland) Scottish Division. Ground originally donated by the commune of Beaumont-Hamel to the Veterans of the 51st Division was found to be unstable because of the many dugouts beneath. Lieutenant Colonel Nangle offered the location within this Memorial Site overlooking Y Ravine, the scene of some of the fiercest fighting on November 13, 1916.

Beaumont-Hamel seared the collective consciousness of Newfoundlanders. Post war they gathered on the first anniversary of the battle, in Newfoundland and with others in France, to remember the extraordinary devotion and courage of the men who fell there. And so they have gathered since. Within the boundaries of the Memorial Site, close to 1,000 men were killed or died on that one fateful day at the beginning of July 1916. Of these, around 200-300 still lie beneath the green grass and wild flowers that soften the site including many of the 130 or so Newfoundlanders from that fateful advance who have no known grave. So now, as then, it remains a place for respect, for reflection and for pilgrimage.

At the entrance to the site is inscribed in bronze an epitaph composed by John Oxenham:

**And with bowed head and heart abased
Strive hard to grasp the future gain in this sore loss.
For not one foot of this dank sod
But drank its surfeit of the blood of gallant men**

Who for their Faith, their Hope, for Life and Liberty
Here made the sacrifice.
Here gave their lives, and right willingly for you and me.



The *Official History* (Military Operations France & Belgium 1916 Volume 1) states that "the explosion of the mine ten minutes before the assault undoubtedly prejudiced the chances of success, as it warned the Germans to be on the alert". The Germans were able to man the front line trenches, often standing in front and firing at the attackers. The 86th Brigade was to capture Beaumont Hamel, and men from the 2/Royal Fusiliers went forward to try and take the Hawthorn Crater, just ahead of the main attack. They did reach the crater, but the Germans were on the opposite side, and the Royal Fusiliers also came under fire from German trenches running to either side. Except for about 120 men of the 2/Royal Fusiliers, none of the other 86th Brigade troops (the other attacking battalions were the 1/Lancashire Fusiliers, 1/Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the 16/Middlesex) reached the German held positions here, and the attack failed.

Basildon Borough Heritage Society - Updated December 2024