

***Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori: The Royal Newfoundland Regiment at
Beaumont-Hamel, July 1, 1916.***

Presented to The St. Bon's Old Boys Association, September 27, 2014.

©Paul W Collins, PhD

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori – as a middle-aged Irish Catholic Newfoundlander, I still remember when Mass was said in Latin and to me, this phrase sounds like something straight out of the Liturgy, even though it predates Christianity by about 100 years. It translates as “it is sweet and right to die for your country.” US General George S Patton - “Ol’ Blood and Guts” himself - had a different view. He once said that there is no glory in dying for your country. The idea is to have the other poor dumb bastard die for his.

Tonight we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War – The Great War - and tragically, eleven million poor dumb bastards died for their countries during the four years of the “War to End All Wars.” We refer to them as “the fallen” or the “glorious dead,” and pronounce that they “slumber” in “God’s Heavenly bosom.” The fact is, they didn’t simply fall; they were shot, gassed, bayoneted, or blown up, while trying to survive in the muck and the misery. There was nothing glorious about it and they aren’t slumbering in anybody’s bosom. Hundreds of thousands are still lying just where they died a century ago.

Some people accuse military historians, such as myself, of glorifying war or being pawns of the military-industrial complex. Nonsense! We appreciate, perhaps better than most, the brutality and criminal stupidity of war, and record it for future generations in the hope that lessons will be learned. Writer/philosopher George Santayana summed it up by saying that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Futile though it may seem, an historian’s job is to remember the past for those who don’t.

So tonight, with the world commemorating old wars, and planning new ones, I can think of no better example of the obscene waste, of an obscene war, than the assault on the inconsequential French village of Beaumont-Hamel on Saturday July 1, 1916. And regrettably, some characterize this travesty as the Royal Newfoundland Regiment's "finest hour." I've been to Beaumont-Hamel, twice, and I can assure you it is, actually, an intensely sad place.

By the second summer of the First World War, the Newfoundland Regiment formed part of the 29th Division of the 8th Corps of the British Expeditionary Force. On the opening day of what is collectively known as the Battle of the Somme, the 29th Division was detailed to take the German-held hamlet of Beaumont-Hamel. The 29th had two objectives: the 86th Brigade, positioned in front of Beaumont-Hamel, and the 87th Brigade, positioned in front of a feature called Y Ravine, were to capture the German front lines running along the Beaucort to Beaumont-Hamel Road. With this accomplished, the 88th Brigade made up of the 1st Battalions of the Essex and the Newfoundland Regiments was to punch through between them and capture the Puisieux Trench, a distance of approximately 3 miles. The attack would begin at 7:30 A.M., July 1.

An intensive bombardment started the British offensive at 6:25 on that summer morning. The German front had supposedly been "softened up" by continual shelling over the previous week. However, this was largely ineffectual as it hadn't cut the barbed wire protecting the German trenches or destroyed the maze of bunkers buried deep underground which kept the enemy safely out of harm's way. All the shelling really did was alert the Germans that a "big push" was coming. They knew where, they just didn't

know when. The dawn bombardment on July 1st answered this question. Any further doubt was eliminated at 7:20 when the British detonated a gigantic mine under the Hawthorn Redoubt - a heavily defended German fortification in front of Beaumont Hamel. The German 119th Reserve Regiment, waiting opposite the 29th Division, used the ten minute lull to scramble out of their dugouts and man their machine gun positions.

At 7:30, the whistle blew and the first wave of the British attack, consisting of the 86th Brigade's Lancaster Fusiliers and Royal Fusiliers, and the 87th Brigade's South Wales Borderers and the First Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers went "over the top," the first two battalions on the left headed for Beaumont-Hamel, and the latter two the right, headed for Y Ravine.

Few of the Lancasters made it far before being cut down by machine gun fire from Y-Ravine. The survivors regrouped in a sunken road and planned another charge at the enemy lines, but of the seventy-six men that made the attempt, only twelve reached the German wire before they too were killed.

The Royal Fusiliers fared no better. Some reached the Hawthorn mine crater as the rest tried for the German lines but few succeeded, again the victims of murderous machine gun fire. Total casualties from both battalions amounted to almost a thousand men killed, wounded or missing.

To the right of the Royals, the South Wales facing Y Ravine barely got 100 yards before machine guns and artillery hit them with a vengeance. Within minutes, the Wales suffered 400 casualties.

The Royal Inniskilling's, directly across from Y-Ravine, were ravaged with machine gun fire and crossfire from the now German-occupied Hawthorn mine crater the

minute they climbed out of their trenches. The whole first assault, some 2000 men, was wiped out in less than ten minutes.

The second wave of the attack followed closely behind the first and consisted of troops from the Middlesex Regiment, the Border Regiment and the King's Own Scottish Borderers. Just as the King's Own climbed out of the trenches, one of the tragic coincidences that often happens in war took place; a white flare appeared over the German lines. This was the enemy's signal to its artillery that its shells were falling short of their targets. By pure bad luck, or perhaps bad planning, it was also the British signal that the German front lines had actually been captured. This, of course, was not the case, and regardless of the slaughter they could clearly see before them in No Man's Land, the men of the second wave went forward and, like their predecessors, were decimated.

In the meantime, based on the misleading flare, Gen. De Lisle, the 29th Division's commander, ordered a third attack by the Essex and Newfoundland Regiments. The Essex tried to move up to the frontline trenches but found them so damaged by shellfire and choked with casualties that they couldn't reach the jump-off point.

The Newfoundland Regiment, however, didn't wait. With the carnage of the previous attacks in full view before them, they crawled out of St. John's Road, which was actually a communication trench and well back from the front lines, and for king and country, headed straight for the enemy.

Stepping over the dead, dying and wounded of the two earlier assaults; amid choking smoke, artillery, and machinegun fire, the Regiment's four companies advanced the 3-500 yards to the gaps in the British wire – A & C companies on the left, B & D on the right. As the only targets on the field, and silhouetted against the morning sky, all the

German gunners lined up on the waves of Newfoundlanders coming at them and “mowed [them] down in heaps.”

The survivors kept going, many hunched over as if facing a North Atlantic gale. Some of A and C companies almost did reach the German front lines before being hit, but most of the other two companies were “stacked up like cordwood” next to the “Danger Tree” a couple of hundred yards into No Man’s Land.

A half hour after launching the assault, the commander of the Newfoundland Regiment, Lt. Colonel Arthur Hadow, reported to brigade command that this attack too had failed and his battalion annihilated. Still under the illusion that the German front lines had been captured, Brigadier General DE Caley ordered Hadow to gather any surviving Newfoundlanders he could find and make another push for the German trenches. Hadow tried, but “dead men can advance no further.” The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment essentially ceased to exist. Every officer was either killed or wounded, and over 650 men were casualties.

In an area roughly the size of Bannerman Park, the 29th Division lost over 200 officers and 5,000 men that morning. The British Expeditionary Force as a whole sustained 60,000 killed, wounded or missing on July 1st. Beaumont-Hamel was not captured until the end of the Somme campaign five months later, by which time British casualties surpassed 400,000 (125,000 dead).

Of the attack on Beaumont-Hamel, Private James Steel wrote: “We were all knocked out before reaching the German trenches. I was knocked over myself about twenty yards from their trenches with shrapnel which struck me in the head after breaking through my steel helmet. I managed to crawl back to our own trenches...”

Private Ron Dunne remembered: “I got up out of the trench, the boys were falling on either side, until there were only two of us left. He got it, he was killed. Then I got it... I stopped the blood as best I could...I was there all day and night. Sunday come. I lived through Sunday but when the sun went down, I give up. I said my prayers and I seen my mom as far as I knew, but I knew she wasn't there.”

And Private Victor Carew lamented days later that, “It is quite lonesome here, now all my chums are gone. I suppose it will be my turn next. I don't much care. I am satisfied to die for my king and country.” And he did, on November 20, 1917.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

Requiescat in pace.

May they rest in peace. Amen.