

Over the top, b'ys

A personal take on cannon fodder carnage
in a suicidal assault in a senseless war

by Bob Wakeham

JOE JUDGE, Will Knight and Norm Coultas huddled against the muddy wall of a trench near the French community of Beaumont-Hamel, dreading orders they knew would come at any moment to head “over the top” and begin a slow and deadly march across an open field towards the German machine guns several hundred yards away.

It was just after 9am on July 1, 1916, a warm Saturday morning, and the three men, members of the Newfoundland Regiment, were about to become bloodied participants in arguably the most tragic chapter in Newfoundland history.

The 801 soldiers from Newfoundland knew, as one was to remark later, that “we were in for it” since earlier attempts that morning by two other regiments to cross the same landscape had been disastrously unsuccessful, with the dead and wounded littering the battlefield.

The men were ordered out of the trenches at 9:15am, and were immediately “mowed down like sheep,” according to the description of one survivor. Another man described the scene as a “butcher shop in hell.” A diary from a German soldier noted matter-of-factly that “even our worse shooters” could bring down the Newfoundlanders, as they crossed a



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A shell bursting amongst the barbed wire entanglements on the battlefield near Beaumont-Hamel, France, taken several months after the Newfoundland Regiment's tragedy, in December 1916.

wide-open field and down a grassy slope, in full view of the machine gunners. One observer in the rear lines was quoted later as saying that the Newfoundlanders held their arms in front of their faces as if they were facing a snowstorm back home, instead of a deadly machine gun fire.

At 9:45am, the attack ended, because, as one British commander was to poignantly write in later years: “Dead men could not advance any further.” The statistics were shocking: of the 801 men who went “over the top,” 324 were killed, 386 were wounded. It had lasted only 30 minutes but it was a half hour of incredible horror that has continued to resonate in homes throughout Newfoundland to this very day. It is

personal. It is intimate.

I know from where I speak.

Joe Judge was my grandfather, and Will Knight and Norm Coultas were my wife Heather's great-uncles. All three are framed in pictures on a wall in our home in Flatrock, a small rural community 20 minutes outside St. John's, proud as peacocks in their Newfoundland Regiment uniforms, forever young and handsome, blissfully unaware of the event that would see them united in perpetuity.

I've wondered over the years whether my maternal Grandfather Judge had any dealings with Norm and Will; my imagination sometimes allows for a sight of them sharing beer and wine and chasing French women during the



Above: A sign marking the Newfoundland Regiment's trench at Beaumont-Hamel. Right: Joe Judge. Opposite page, top: Norm Coultas; bottom: Will Knight.

occasional lull in the fighting; interludes when they and their comrades sought a spark of sanity during the madness of trench warfare.

Pop, as I came to know him decades later, was a "bay man," born and raised in Point Verde, a tiny fishing village of fewer than 100 families in Placentia Bay, who left in his late teens to move to the central Newfoundland community of Grand Falls to work in the paper mill there. Norm and Will, on the other hand, were "townies," natives of St. John's. They were also brothers-in-law.

There is a relatively good chance Pop may have spent time with Will. Pop was a "hard ticket," in Newfoundland parlance, who loved his rum and beer (and judging by his military records that detailed the medical repercussions of brothel visits, often sought the company of French women).

Will Knight appears to have been somewhat of a maverick; his letters home from the regiment's training base in Scotland display the soul of a rebel, an apparently irreverent character who bragged about being disciplined and having been stripped temporarily of one of his sergeant's stripes because he refused to intercede in a fight between two of his fellow Newfoundlanders.

Norm, though, does not appear to have shared in the wild colonial boy lifestyle of his brother-in-law or my Grandfather Judge. In fact, he was just a youngster, a 17-year-old, five foot, six inches tall, 117 pounds soaking wet, who lied about his age in order to enlist to fight in the Great War. Norm's moth-



IMAGE COURTESY OF BOB WAKEHAM

er dispatched her eldest son Herb to the St. John's waterfront to try and have the younger Coultas removed from the *Florizel*, the sealing vessel turned troop carrier, on the day it was set to depart for the killing fields overseas. Norm,

... "the Newfoundlanders held their arms in front of their faces as if they were facing a snowstorm back home, instead of deadly machine gun fire "

though, ignored his older brother's pleas to return to his mother's home on Patrick Street in downtown St. John's. He was determined to take part in the "Great Adventure," as so many soldiers naively and euphemistically described the war. (Norm was almost lucky enough to avoid the Beaumont-Hamel debacle, having been hospitalized with frostbite followed by appendicitis, but was discharged from medical care and sent back to the front lines just weeks before July 1.)

What is undeniable about the rela-

tionship of Pop, Norm and Will is that the bay man and the two townies, along with their fellow countrymen, were in that filthy, rat-infested trench near Beaumont-Hamel on the morning of July 1, 1916, awaiting a call to carnage.

According to an account given me by one of Pop's sons, who heard the story from another Grand Falls veteran of Beaumont-Hamel, my grandfather and another soldier were carrying a Bangalore torpedo, a five-foot-long piece of pipe-like weaponry used to blow holes in the barbed wire. Pop's partner was shot and killed during the attack, and the pipe fell to the ground. As Pop shouted for someone to replace the downed man, he, too, was hit, a bullet piercing his left hand, the force of the shot driving him into a crater.



IMAGE COURTESY OF BOB WAKEHAM



IMAGE COURTESY OF EDE WAKEHAM

As for Will and Norm, my wife's two great uncles, they were both killed in that half hour of horror. There is no way of knowing how far they advanced after leaving the trench or whether they died instantly. Their bodies were never identified, apparently blown to bits in the days after July 1 by German bombs.

My grandfather's terror was far from over. He lay in that protective crater throughout the day, and listened in obvious fear and helplessness as German snipers picked off the wounded stranded in the open area called No Man's Land.

When darkness and relative calm

descended over the battlefield, he crawled back to his lines, was taken to a first aid camp, and eventually transported to hospital in London.

It was a week before Pop's family was notified that he had lived through the Beaumont-Hamel catastrophe.

The telegram to his mother Mary was succinct:

NEWFOUNDLAND POSTAL TELEGRAPHS

Dated: 10th July, 1916.

To: Mrs. Mary Judge, Point Verde, Placentia Bay, Nfld
Regret to inform you No. 1039 Private Joseph Judge reported Wandswoth Hospital. Wounded hand.

J. P. Bennett
Colonial Secretary.

Families throughout Newfoundland had become aware through news reports of the July 1st tragedy, but there was an inhumane delay before many of the relatives received definitive information about the fate of their loved ones.

For three weeks, Will Knight's family in St. John's had no way of knowing whether he was alive. One letter to Will from his father after July 1 expressed hope that Will had somehow survived the disaster. The letter was eventually returned to the family, unopened. The envelope was mercilessly and coldly stamped: "DEAD."

The telegram the family eventually received was straightforward.

NEWFOUNDLAND POSTAL TELEGRAPHS

Dated: 26th July, 1916.

To: Knight Family Southside Road, St. John's
Regret to have to inform you that the record offices of the First Nfld. Regiment, London, today reports that your son, no. 290, Sgt William B. Knight, was killed in action, July 1, 1916.

Yours sympathetically,
Colonial Secretary.



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Incredibly, it was not until the fall of 1916 that the family of Norm Coultas received confirmation that he had been killed July 1. There had been some meagre hope that he had been taken prisoner by the Germans. The final letter was dominated by grandiose, overblown language, that was, no doubt, of little solace to Maria.

Nov. 23, 1916.
To: Maria Coultas
80 Patrick Street, St. John's
It will, no doubt, be some consolation to you to think that he, for whom you now mourn, willingly answered the call of King and Country, did his part nobly, and fell facing the foe, in defence of the principles of Righteousness, Truth and Liberty. I trust that you may have the grace and consolation of the Great Father of us all at this time.

With sincere sympathy,
Believe me to be,
Your obedient servant,
Colonial Secretary.

I was lucky enough to visit Beaumont-Hamel 10 years ago with my wife and other family members, and it was, to say the least, a profoundly moving experience to actually walk on the same plot of land where Pop, Norm and Will had marched into hell a

century ago. And, for Heather and her brother Bill, there was also the emotional realization that the remains of their two great uncles were somewhere just beneath the now grass-covered field of Beaumont-Hamel.

Beaumont-Hamel, I would re-emphasize, is not merely an historical event for many of us here in Newfoundland. The direct descendents of that day of infamy exist on every corner. My mother, Eileen Wakeham, for instance, active and smart at the age of 90, can still recall how her father and other veterans of what they called the "July Drive" would congregate each year in his Monchy Road home after the July 1 ceremonies in Grand Falls, drink a lot, sing a lot, and remember their dead comrades.

And when I was in my preteens, my family would venture into Grand Falls from our home in Gander at least once a month to visit Pop (his wife Mary passed away prematurely at the age of 47). My grandfather was one of the most respected men in Grand Falls, I was told years later—a man who had risen through the ranks to become a foreman in the mill. But it was his war record, and the fact that he had been wounded on three different occasions, and still made his way home to raise a family of six children and become a vital part of the community, that had

prompted the people of Grand Falls to hold him in such high esteem.

The battle of Beaumont-Hamel created a special bond between me and Pop, a bond of his making, and manifested in a crude but powerful ritual that was always played out whenever we visited his home.

Pop would spend much of his time in a rocking chair in front of the kitchen stove, very often listening to traditional Newfoundland music on his record player, and keeping time with his ever-tapping feet. But he'd rise when I delivered the first cue to our never-changing script: "Show me your wounds, Pop, show me your wounds. The one from Beaumont-Hamel first, Pop, the one in the hand."

The rest of the family would stop whatever they were doing as Pop would rise slowly from his chair and hold out his left hand, so I could see the ugly thick scar, still evident 40 years after Beaumont-Hamel. I'd gently run my finger along its ragged route.

"Now, the one in the back and in the leg, Pop, the one in the leg," I'd say.

Pop would pull up his pants leg to show me the scar on the back of his leg and lift his shirt to expose the wound on his back.

"Now the one in the elbow, Pop." My grandfather would roll up his left arm to reveal large hideous scars on the

From the left: German barbed wire entanglements, known as "knife rests," photographed in the Beaumont-Hamel area; Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial, Somme area, France.

inside and outside his elbow, still very visible four decades after the war had ended.

"Now the bullet went in here, right?" I'd say, as I delicately touched the outside of his elbow, "and they took it out on the other side, right?" "That's true, Bobby," he'd respond.

"Show me how one arm is shorter than the other," I'd then order.

And Pop would stretch out his two arms to indicate that, indeed, the arm with the wound that had finally forced his superiors to send him back to Newfoundland was several inches shorter than the other.

NEWFOUNDLAND POSTAL TELEGRAPHS

August 24, 1917

To: Mrs. Mary Judge
Point Verde, Placentia

Regret to inform you that record offices, London, officially reports no. 1039, Private Joseph Judge, was at Eighth Red Cross Hospital, Latouquet, August 17, suffering from severe gunshot wound in the left elbow.

Colonial Secretary.

After our routine was over, Pop would invariably pour himself a drink, and I'd go out in the back of his house to chase the hens.

I'm now in my 60s—the same vintage as Pop during those visits to Grand Falls; and I've had enough time to conclude that Pop wasn't displaying a soldier's bravado. Far from it.

My grandfather felt it was important that I never forget what happened to him and the other members of the Newfoundland Regiment, men like Norm Coultas and Will Knight, on that bloody battlefield 100 years ago.

I never have.

I never will. 🐾

(Note: Bob Wakeham of St. John's is a former print journalist and television producer.)

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