Newfoundland and Labrador and WW1 100 Years Later: Legacies and Learnings
This series of articles was commissioned by Action Canada to tell the story of Newfoundland’s participation in the First World War. The series was published in *The Telegram* of St. John’s in advance of Action Canada’s 2015 Newfoundland and Labrador conference. As part of the conference, Action Canada hosted a public dialogue titled: “Newfoundland and Labrador and the First World War 100 Years Later: Legacies and Learnings”.

Today is one year short of the centenary of one of the most traumatic events in Newfoundland and Labrador history: the disaster that befell the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916.

Eight hundred and one men left their trenches to take part in the British offensive along the River Somme in France. Hampered by poor planning, a misguided British faith in the effectiveness of their artillery bombardments, and facing superior German defensive positions, these soldiers withered in barbed wire and machine-gun fire.

When the smoke of battle cleared, 324 men had been killed or were missing and presumed dead, while another 386 were wounded. The day had produced a scale of death and tragedy which had not been experienced before in Newfoundland.

It was not until July 26 that the disaster was fully made known in Newfoundland newspapers. British authorities had time to “spin” the defeat of July 1 into an unprecedented moral victory.
On July 6, Gov. Sir Walter Davidson warned of bad news to come, but promised “the world will ring forever with the imperishable fame of the heroes of Newfoundland, who have made sure for all time that the Loyal Colony is worthy of its ancient name.”

On July 14, local papers printed the British Commander-in-Chief Gen. Sir Douglas Haig’s salute to the Regiment following the failed advance, the general claiming that the Regiment had “showed itself worthy of the highest traditions of the British race, and proved itself to be a fit representative of the population of the oldest British colony,” and famously declaring “Newfoundlanders, I salute you individually. You have done better than the best.”

The message was clear: the casualties of 1916 would enjoy glory forever because they had been dutiful soldiers of Empire. There was some truth in the message. The previous decade had witnessed a surge in a Newfoundland-centred patriotism, often associated with Sir Cavendish Boyle’s “The Ode to Newfoundland.” However, this patriotism was very St. John’s-centred, and the capital was the bastion of a mercantile elite firmly oriented towards Britain.

This elite dominated outport fishing people. Their champion had emerged in William Coaker and the Fishermen’s Protective Union. Coaker fought for fishers’ rights, but he saw these rights as the entitlements due to any true “Briton.” The young men who rallied to the Union Jack when war was declared in 1914 - some unemployed, many seeking boyish adventure and glory, and all believing the war might be over by Christmas - enlisted for Empire, not for Newfoundland.

Not everyone was satisfied to commemorate those who fell only by testimonials and, following the war, by monuments. Coaker had joined the government late in 1917 and served through the 1920s, arguing that people and government had a duty to reconstruct a better post-war world. Better education, better management of industries such as the fishery, and more equitable distributions of income would be more appropriate monuments to the casualties of war.

Coaker’s ideas met bitter opposition. Coaker’s opponents began to commemorate those who had died in the war, not primarily as loyal sons of Empire, but as defenders of “liberty,” by which they meant the rule of the free market. Anyone like Coaker who advocated for market regulation or social welfare was a Hun-like traitor to the memory of the fallen.

As economic recession, unemployment, demands for public relief, and public debt grew, merchants, conservative politicians and newspaper editors alike added a new nationalist tinge by asserting that true Newfoundlanders would rather die of hunger than betray the memory of the fallen heroes of war by asking for government assistance. The resulting poisoning of the political atmosphere contributed greatly to the suspension of responsible government in the early 1930s.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the politics of commemorating the fallen of the First World War in Newfoundland and Labrador assumed even more nationalist tones, especially in the portrayal of the disaster of 1 July, 1916 as a sacrificial consecration of the birth of an “independent” Newfoundland.

It is sobering to think that the memory of the casualties of war has been used partially for later political purposes for almost a century. It is possible that, in the process of “remembering,” we may be in danger of forgetting the real aspirations of the men of 1916 when we gather on Memorial Day tomorrow.

Sean Cadigan is a history professor at Memorial University and the author of Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914-34.
We get so serious when we talk about war. Those panels on war and the experts all grow pensive and build arguments that sound authoritative.

But then I turn the channel and there is a baseball player on third base in the world series and I notice, in a crucial moment in a pivotal tide-turning game, that he’s eating out there. He’s flicking sunflower seeds around third base.

He’s eating!

And then I remember, in Siegfried Sassoon’s fictional memoir of the First World War, that on the morning of the start of the Battle of the Somme, when so many Newfoundlanders were killed, he returned to his trench to shave and eat an orange. He was hungry.

I would be very hungry in war. I’m hungry whenever I have to do work. War must be all about that.

A series of actions you’d rather not do. But a hundred years ago almost all of the Newfoundland soldiers were still alive, eating in Scotland.

Some were killed in training accidents or chopping down trees, others from drinking too heavily.

But there is a letter complaining that a brace of partridge sent to a particular soldier did not reach him.

The soldier was on leave, and the birds were starting to get high. So the order came to cook the birds.

Men opened parcels on the front lines that held obliterated portions of wedding cake.

They soaked salt fish and boiled it in their helmets. Why do I care what the men ate? Because they were alive and I’m alive. I care that a nurse from Belleoram, Frances Cluett, sent home to her mother a slip of a rose bush growing in the hospital gardens in Rouen. As soon as I read that I drove down the Burin to inspect the Cluett garden. Did I see a French rose bush? I don’t know, but how else are we to connect to the dead?

Eric Ellis kept tiny notebooks that are now in the Rooms in St John’s. Ellis desperately wanted to get into the war. But he was a good shot, so they kept him in England, training the new drafts of men. He only fired his gun once, and that was on leave back in Carbonear, shooting birds. But in October 1918 they sent him over, and he joined the regiment just after the armistice was signed.

He arrived in France to see the regiment congratulating Tommy Ricketts for having won the Victoria Cross. You can
imagine the British generals, alarmed that the end of war was about to storm down upon them, and no one in the regiment had yet won the VC. What about this strapping man in his 30s? Yes, but he’s been in hospital for eight months with gonorrhea. No, we don’t want him shaking the king’s hand. See here, this teenager, Tommy Ricketts. Let’s give it to him.

Tommy Ricketts returned home a hero of the country and “surrendered” to the people of Newfoundland - that’s the word his son uses to describe the attempt to educate his father. They wanted to make him a doctor. But he became a druggist. If he hadn’t have won the VC, he would have been a fisherman in White Bay.

There’s a photo of Tommy Ricketts in his pharmacy. He’s reading a sports magazine article entitled, “How to Fool Smart Ducks.” I feel like he’s trying to tell me something.

I turn on the radio and there’s Vera Lynn singing “We’ll Meet Again.” It was introduced by the radio host as a song about the First World War. And by the end of the song the host has come on to apologize and say, of course, that was World War Two.

I began this article talking about a baseball player. They say war is an extension of sport. But it is not. War is an entirely different beast and should be separated, always, from sport.

But we all do this. We confuse the facts about the past, about what happened and in what order. We mix together entertainment and death.

Eric Ellis, who had never seen a day of war, was part of the regiment that marched into Germany to occupy it. They crossed the fields of Waterloo and, Eric Ellis writes, there was a museum to the battle. They climbed the stairs into a little rotunda, and there on this wall, was Napoleon’s army, fighting. It felt like I was there, Ellis wrote. That he was experiencing war for the first time.

And here I was, in a museum built a hundred years after the First World War, reading about Eric Ellis enjoying the battle of Waterloo.

Sometimes it takes a hundred years to understand what it is to be alive and in war. The more I read things like this, the harder it gets not to let the dead bury the living. It might be the only way to fool smart ducks.

Michael Winter is the author of Into the Blizzard: Walking the Fields of the Newfoundland Dead. He lives in Toronto and Conception Bay.
During the First World War, Newfoundland women took on more of the emotional and economic burden in their families. They also raised money, and supplied socks, pyjamas, cigarettes and other comforts for servicemen.

A small number also served overseas as nurses and as members of the British Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), an organization founded in 1909 to provide helpers for nurses in military hospitals. By 1918, at least 18 nurses and 42 VADs left Newfoundland for overseas service; others engaged in war service through avenues in allied countries.

Compared to the 15,000 women who engaged in home front war work, these numbers are small. Overseas service was only an option for women who could afford to leave home for volunteer work. Nevertheless, nurses and VADs became important symbols of women’s contribution. Their service was well publicized, and feminist leaders of the day hailed them as heroines.

After the war, their war work would be part of the argument for extending the vote to women. Their experiences also demonstrate the unfolding realization among military leaders that the war would be a long and costly one. Initial offers of help were rebuffed, but by the end of 1915, continued losses and plans for new offences led to a change of tune.

From 1915 to 1917, women wrote to the Governor’s Office offering to go overseas as nurses and Red Cross workers. Local authorities agreed to cover their costs, but the British War Office discouraged such volunteers, fearing an influx of untrained “ladies” who would be more of a hindrance than a help. Even trained nurses were initially refused.

Three months after the war started, Gov. Walter E. Davidson wrote London on behalf of nurses who wanted to serve overseas. He was politely informed that since there was a reserve of nurses in England, no Newfoundlanders were required.

At least one General Hospital nurse did not take no for an answer. Maysie Parsons joined a Canadian nursing contingent which left Montreal for Belgium in April 1915. She went on to a long war service in Belgium, London, Lemnos, Cairo and Salonika.

A few would-be VADs also disregarded official discouragement. By 1914 Janet Miller had already shown her determination in the face of official resistance by successfully fighting a law society ban on women law students. When the war started, she followed her fiancé, Eric Ayre, to Scotland.
where they were married. She worked there in canteens and hospital kitchens until Eric’s death at Beaumont Hamel when she moved London. There she worked as a VAD and trained as an ambulance driver. After the war she became a leader of Newfoundland’s suffrage movement.

As the conflict claimed more men, it required more women to cook and clean and to nurse them. In November 1915, responding to the first official British War Office request, four VADs left under the supervision of graduate nurse Francis Morey. Following the Somme campaign there was a further rush to get volunteers overseas. Several VADs who had been working in local hospitals for as much as a year left for England in this period. New volunteers were given a few weeks’ first aid training in October 1916 and were on their way overseas by the middle of November.

Most VADs served in England, taking on domestic tasks to free nurses for more skilled work. After some experience they might help with bandages, and could request a posting in France or Belgium.

VAD Sybil Johnson, daughter of a Supreme Court judge, served near Liverpool. In a letter home, she described a horrific dressing:

“The man had sores all down his back and it was altogether a fearful and repulsive business. I hadn’t much to do but hold him steady when I helped roll him over on his side. He was a Scotchman and so game and plucky and kept talking away to me and held my arm and his hand was like a firebrand. ... In a way I was glad to help but it was horrible.”

Nothing in Johnson’s sheltered background would have prepared her for such a task. Even nurses, trained to maintain a professional detachment, struggled to deal with the large numbers of deaths and injuries to so many young men.

In a letter from Belgium, Maysie Parsons referred to the sound of the bombing going on less than 10 miles away:

“It is just the same as thunder and lightning, and to think that every flash means so many deaths!”

It is difficult to know how much their war experience changed these women or exactly what impact they had on those at home, but there are traces in the records.

VAD Jeanette Coultas recalled the terrible suffering she witnessed, but also reflected that it was one of the best times of her life.

In the last days of the war, Germans bombed casualty clearing stations in France, increasing both fear and workload for nurses. While horrified at the increased suffering this meant for injured men, VAD Frances Cluett maintained that, “nothing would induce me to give it up.”

Two Newfoundland VADs lost their lives treating servicemen suffering from Spanish flu. Bertha Bartlett died at Wandsworth hospital and was buried in the Newfoundland section of Wandsworth cemetery. In the summer of 1918, Ethel Dickenson was sent home to rest, but in October was called back to service treating flu victims at a local military hospital; she died on Oct. 26. The impact of women’s war service is perhaps best seen in her memorial, raised after a subscription campaign led by St. John’s women. Standing on the border of Cavendish Square, the Dickenson memorial commemorates her service and that of all Newfoundland women who cared for the injured of the First World War.

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Fresh Battles to Fight

BY EDWARD ROBERTS

Britain’s David Lloyd George, hailed by his countrymen as “the man who won the War,” famously proclaimed during the December 1918 general election that “our task is to make Britain a land fit for heroes to live in.”

In April 1918, Newfoundland’s veterans formed the Returned Soldiers and Sailors and Rejected Men’s Association to make their homeland such a country, too. (“Rejected Men” were those who had volunteered but did not meet the medical requirements.) The Newfoundlanders soon became linked to Canada’s Great War Veterans Association (GWVA) and began to advance their cause.

The creation of memorials to honour and to remember those who fought, and especially those who died, were among the first goals of the newly formed GWVA.

The Newfoundland government issued the Trail of the Caribou commemorative series of 12 stamps early in 1919, and the Imperial War Graves Commission, with Father Thomas Nangle as Newfoundland’s representative, began its great work of ensuring that those who had paid the supreme sacrifice were properly buried. (Nangle, a Roman Catholic priest who had served with the Regiment in the latter years of the war, was a prominent member of the GWVA.)

The GWVA led the drive to build Newfoundland’s National War Memorial in St. John’s and the Memorial Park at Beaumont Hamel, which honours the Newfoundland and Labrador soldiers whose last resting places are “known (only) to God.”

The government then called on them to organize the opening ceremony for the National Memorial, on July 1, 1924. They,
in turn, asked Field Marshal Earl Haig, their Commander-in-Chief on the Somme, to be the principal guest at the week-long events which marked the occasion.

He came to Newfoundland, and a year later in June 1925, also presided at the dedication of the Caribou and the memorial plaques at Beaumont Hamel. Those who blame Haig for the regiment’s heavy casualties during the war would do well to remember that the men who actually fought chose to honour him in this way.

Pensions and jobs were the dominant veterans’ issues of the day, and became ever more important as economic conditions worsened during the 1920s. Those who had served believed they were entitled to jobs before anyone else, and particularly jobs in the civil service, in addition to pensions for themselves and their dependents. Although they described themselves as “an association without politics,” in the words of Nangle, their president in 1924, they did not hesitate to use political pressure to advance their causes.

But the GWVA was also quick to come to the support of the civil authorities in troubled times. Its members formed a citizens’ militia that patrolled St. John’s in the aftermath of the April 1932 riots and helped to restore civil order.

Three Newfoundland veterans — Regimental Sgt. Maj. Fred LeGrow in Bay de Verde, Sgt. Harvey Small in Burgeo and LaPoile, and Lt.-Col. Michael Sullivan in Placentia and St. Mary’s — were among the 36 men elected to the House of Assembly in the general election in the fall of 1919.

Maj. Peter Cashin, from Ferryland, the stormy petrel of Newfoundland politics for 40 years, entered the House in 1923. Many other Great War veterans won elective office in the years that followed. No fewer than six were among the 40 MHAs elected in 1928. And Ernest Gear, the last member elected to the Assembly of the Dominion of Newfoundland (in a byelection on March 21, 1933), was also a veteran, having served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. His brother George, a member of the Newfoundland Regiment, was killed in November 1917, during the Battle of Cambrai.

Thomas Ashbourne from Twillingate, who had served in the Assembly and the National Convention, and Leonard Stick (the first man to sign up to serve, he proudly bore Regimental No.1), were among the seven Newfoundlanders elected to the House of Commons in 1949. (Each served three terms before retiring in 1958.)

Herman Quinton, one of only two men ever to defeat Joseph Smallwood in a personal election (in Bonavista South in 1932), became a member of the Commission of Government in 1947, and after Confederation served in Smallwood’s first cabinet and subsequently as a senator.

Three other Newfoundland veterans — Alexander Baird, John Gilbert Higgins and Malcolm Hollett — also became senators, while Harry Mews was a longtime mayor of St. John’s.

Sam Hefferton was a member of the House and Smallwood’s cabinet for 10 years, until 1959. Stephen Smith was the last member of the Regiment to sit in the House, where he represented Port au Port from 1956 until 1966.

The GWVA’s political efforts reached their peak in 1932, when they played a major role in the defeat of Richard Squires and his Liberals in the June general election. Harold Mitchell, its first president, defeated Squires himself in Trinity South, and was cheered by his fellow veterans when he returned triumphantly to St. John’s. The association supported the Alderdice administration’s surrender of Newfoundland’s self-government, and continued to advocate for veterans throughout the Commission era. In 1944, supported by 80,000 voters (about 70 per cent of the total electorate), it convinced the commissioners to increase veterans’ pensions and other benefits substantially.

In 1949, when we became Canadians, the GWVA merged with the Royal Canadian Legion. The men who had served their King and country so nobly during the 1914-18 continued to serve Newfoundland throughout their lives.

Edward Roberts, a former lieutenant-governor, is deeply interested in Newfoundland’s history. He edited and annotated A Blue Puttee at War: the Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost, MC.
There is no accurate count of the number of brothers who served in the Newfoundland Regiment during the First World War, but it is safe to assume that the number would be in well into the hundreds. Add to this those who had brothers in other fighting forces, then the number would be even higher.

Brothers enlisting in the Newfoundland Regiment take many forms. Some joined up together or in close proximity to one another, while others were years apart, some even after their brothers had been killed or died of wounds. Others, once they had experienced the fighting, were adamant in letters home to their parents that their younger brothers not be allowed to enlist. Lance Cpl. Curtis Forsey of Grand Bank exhorted his parents on a number of occasions not to allow his younger brother Sam to join up, as did Pte. Lester Barbour of Newtown in reference to his younger brother, Carl. Brothers did join up, however, and their stories compound the tragedy of the war for their families at home.

By the time war broke out in 1914, Charles Robert Ayre had already been dead for 25 years. A resident of St. John’s, he was the founder of Ayre & Sons Ltd. His marriage to Mary Hannah Bray produced six sons and one daughter, who in turn produced 22 grandchildren, 11 girls and 11 boys. Six of those boys, three sets of brothers, took part in the First World War, four as members of the Newfoundland Regiment.

The first pair are Capt. Eric Ayre and Capt. Bernard Ayre, the only children of Lydia Gertrude Pitts and Robert Chesley Ayre. Eric was in St. John’s working at Ayre & Sons when the war broke out, while Bernard was in England, attending Cambridge University.

Eric was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Newfoundland Regiment within days of the declaration of war and formation of the Regiment. Bernard, too, was granted a commission as a lieutenant but he opted to remain in England where his commission was with the Norfolk Regiment.

Both were recognized for their leadership abilities and were soon promoted to captain. Eric was given command of D Company and led his men over the top at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916, where he met his death.

The Norfolk Regiment also took part in the Battle of the Somme on July 1st and one of the officers killed that day was Bernard Ayre. Robert and Lydia had lost both their sons within a few hours of each other, although it took some time for news of their deaths to reach St. John’s.

Also with the Newfoundland Regiment that July 1st morning were two Ayre cousins: 2nd Lt. Gerald Ayre, son of Mary Julia Pitts and Frederick William Ayre; and 2nd Lt. Wilfred Ayre, son of Diana Agnes Stevenson and Charles Pascoe Ayre.

Gerald was part of the second contingent which went over under his cousin Eric’s command in April 1915, while Wilfred was one of the First Five Hundred. Both rose through the ranks quickly and both were part of the officer corps at Beaumont Hamel, where they met their death.

The two Ayre cousins who returned to Newfoundland were Gerald’s brother Charles and Wilfred’s brother Ronald.

Five grandsons
Another group of brothers and cousins were the five grandsons William Patrick Walsh, an Irish immigrant to Newfoundland who spent many years operating a grocery and provisions establishment on Water Street.

A dabbler in politics, in 1869 he was elected to the House of Assembly as an anti-Confederate supporter of Charles Fox Bennet, whose electoral victory gave short shrift to Newfoundland becoming part of Canada at that time. Walsh and his wife were the parents of four daughters, one of whom, Mary, married Dr. Lawrence Keegan, a medical doctor originally from Ireland, while Margaret married Thomas Edens, who operated a successful mercantile establishment.

The best known of Walsh grandsons was Kevin Keegan, who was partway through medical studies at Trinity College,
Dublin, when the war broke out. He returned to Newfoundland immediately and enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment. He saw action throughout the war, won the Military Cross for his gallantry at Monchy-le-Preux and a Bar to the Military Cross for his actions at Broembeek, where he was wounded.

After the war, his life took a major career change. Instead of returning to medical studies in Ireland, he went to the United States where he joined The Philip H. Collins Company, Investment Dealers, in Cleveland, Ohio. He married there in 1921 and he died there in 1948, aged 56.

His younger brother, Patrick, enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment late in the war. After discharge, he studied law under John Fenelon and was called to the Bar of Newfoundland in 1932. Sometime later in that decade he, too, moved to the United States. He enlisted in the United States Navy in the Second World War after which he was engaged in business in Cambridge, Mass. He died there, just a few months after his brother, in the spring of 1949, aged 51.

The Keegan brothers both survived the First World War; their cousins, the Edens brothers, were not so lucky. The three Edens boys, John, Francis and Leonard, all joined the Newfoundland Regiment and saw service overseas. John was first to enlist but was delayed going overseas because of an attack of appendicitis. He eventually made it to the Western Front where he was killed in the fighting at Masnières on Nov. 20, 1917.

Leonard was next to sign up. He saw little action with the Regiment before being allowed to transfer to the Royal Air Force in the summer of 1917. He was shot down in a dogfight over Roulers, Belgium, on June 13, 1918 and was taken prisoner. He was later reported as having died in captivity.

Francis was the last of the brothers to enlist; he came through the war and lived in St. John’s, where he worked for a number of years as an investment broker. He never married and lived with his mother until his untimely death in 1942 at age 47. His mother lived on alone, having lost all three of her sons to the war or its aftereffects, until her death in 1947.

Riggs brothers

Three sons of Mary Grace Lee and John Riggs of Grand Bank also enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment. All three survived the war, in that they returned to Newfoundland after it ended. However, the war had taken its toll.

Sgt. Leslie Riggs was one of the 68 men who survived the carnage at Beaumont Hamel and answered role call some days later. He lived in Flat Islands, Placentia Bay, after the war, where he died in 1937, at age 45. His brother, Sgt. Rennie Riggs, lived in Marystown after the war, where he died in 1930, at age 34. The bodies of both brothers were brought to Grand Bank for burial. So, too, was the body of their brother Morgan. He spent much of his life after the war in the Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases, a victim of what today is called post-traumatic stress disorder. He died there in 1962, age 69.

Josiah and Louisa Goodyear lived in Ladle Cove before moving to Grand Falls shortly after the paper mill was built around 1908. They were the parents of six sons and one daughter. Five of their sons fought in the First World War, four as members of the Newfoundland Regiment. The fifth, Hedley, was teaching school in Toronto at the time, and joined up there with the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Of the four who joined the Newfoundland Regiment, Stan, the eldest, and Ray, the youngest, were both killed: Stan, a lieutenant, at Broembeek, on Oct. 10, 1917, was awarded the Military Cross posthumously; and Ray, a private, at Gueudecourt on Oct. 12, 1916. Ken, a captain, and Joe, a lieutenant, both survived the war. Hedley was not so lucky; he, too, was killed, near Rosières-en-Santerre, France, on Aug. 22, 1918.

These are just four of the many families whose lives were permanently changed by the events of the First World War. There are hundreds more whose stories need to be told.

Joe Goodyear’s grandson, David Macfarlane, has written an exceptional account of the Goodyear family and the war entitled “The Danger Tree.” He sums up the effect the war had on not just his, but all of those families: “The century that carried on past the moments of their deaths was not what it might have been. It was largely a makeshift arrangement, cobbled round their constant and disastrous absence.”

Bert Riggs is an archivist and the editor of Grand Bank Soldier: The War Letters of Lance Corporal Curtis Forsey.
"The bulk of His Majesty's subjects in Newfoundland had then been steeped in ease for hundreds of years and imbued with an instinctive aversion to war, albeit the bravest of people in their own seafaring conditions... The larger part were on the whole inclined – living in the misty atmosphere of past centuries – to side with the King of Prussia, as the champion of Protestantism, and they remembered France only as the traditional enemy. The old memories of the press-gang still lived in the outports..."

— Sir Walter Edward Davidson, Governor of Newfoundland, 1912-1917

Sir Davidson wrote that in 1917, a year after the massacre at Beaumont Hamel, as part of a request for the prime minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, to be made a member of the British House of Lords as a reward for having persuaded the Newfoundlanders to go to war anyway. (Morris got his peerage,
and promptly settled in London, sending his resignation home by post. But the Newfoundland Regiment, as it was then called, did not start out in France, fighting Germans on Western Front. First it was sent to fight Turks, at Gallipoli.

By the time the Newfoundlanders arrived at Gallipoli in the fall of 1915, the British attempt to break through the Straits to Istanbul and knock Turkey out of the war had failed. Almost half a million Turkish, British, French, Australian, New Zealand and Newfoundland soldiers were mired in stalemated trench warfare.

The great offensives were over, but “by sickness and snipers’ bullets we were losing thirty men a day,” wrote John Gallishaw of the Newfoundland Regiment in his memoir, Trenching at Gallipoli. “Nobody in the front-line trenches or on the shell-swept area behind ever expected to leave the Peninsula alive.”

The Gallipoli campaign is almost forgotten in Newfoundland, but for the Turks it is a sacred place where they took two hundred thousand casualties to stop the British Empire from conquering Istanbul. In the late 1980s I went there with a film crew for a television series we were making about Canadian (and Newfoundland) military history. When our guide found out that I spoke Turkish, he asked if his retired father (who spoke nothing else) could take the job instead. He was curious about why these foreigners had come from all over to attack Turkey.

As we went around the old entrenchments and the military cemeteries, I told the old man about where Newfoundland was and what it had been like then, and tried to explain why our young men had come all that way to invade his country. He was ahead of me: he told me how sorry he was for them, because they had also been the victims of the British Empire. But the soldiers themselves had a simpler explanation.

“I’d like to know,” said one chap, “why we all enlisted.”

“I wish you fellows would shut up and go to sleep,” said a querulous voice from a near-by dug-out.

“It doesn’t do any good to talk about it now,” said Art Pratt, in a matter of fact voice. “Some of you enlisted so full of love of country that there was patriotism running down your chin, and some of you enlisted because you were disappointed in love, but the most of you enlisted for love of adventure, and you’re getting it.”

Again the querulous subterranean voice erupted: “Go to sleep, you fellows – there’s none of you knows what you’re talking about. There’s only one reason any of us enlisted, and that’s pure, low down, unmitigated ignorance.”

— John Gallishaw, Trenching at Gallipoli.
For Pte. Hugh Walter McWhirter, it wasn’t a long war. The son of Henry and Lottie McWhirter of Humbermouth, now part of Corner Brook, McWhirter had enlisted as an infantryman in the Newfoundland Regiment on Jan. 4, 1915.

With Britain’s entry into the First World War the previous August, young Newfoundlanders enthusiastically joined the new regiment “for the duration of the war, but not exceeding one year.” They would first see action on an unexpected front, the eastern Mediterranean, where Allied troops were fighting to gain control of the Dardanelles Strait, a potential supply line to Russia.

McWhirter, 21, was among 1,076 men from the regiment who landed in Suvla Bay on the Gallipoli Peninsula on Sept. 20, 1915. There they faced heavy enemy fire from the defending Turks, shells falling thick about the Newfoundlanders as they frantically began digging trenches to protect themselves.

On Sept. 22, McWhirter became the first member of the Newfoundland Regiment to be killed in action in the First World War, struck by a Turkish shell. According to one account, the “inglorious immediacy” of his death acted as a warning to those around him that “war was serious business. ... He had simply been standing, deafened by the screech and explosion of artillery; a terrified boy in an ill-

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Sad Statistic
BY CATHY BEEHAN

For Pte. Hugh Walter McWhirter, it wasn’t a long war. The son of Henry and Lottie McWhirter of Humbermouth, now part of Corner Brook, McWhirter had enlisted as an infantryman in the Newfoundland Regiment on Jan. 4, 1915.

With Britain’s entry into the First World War the previous August, young Newfoundlanders enthusiastically joined the new regiment “for the duration of the war, but not exceeding one year.” They would first see action on an unexpected front, the eastern Mediterranean, where Allied troops were fighting to gain control of the Dardanelles Strait, a potential supply line to Russia.

McWhirter, 21, was among 1,076 men from the regiment who landed in Suvla Bay on the Gallipoli Peninsula on Sept. 20, 1915. There they faced heavy enemy fire from the defending Turks, shells falling thick about the Newfoundlanders as they frantically began digging trenches to protect themselves.

On Sept. 22, McWhirter became the first member of the Newfoundland Regiment to be killed in action in the First World War, struck by a Turkish shell. According to one account, the “inglorious immediacy” of his death acted as a warning to those around him that “war was serious business. ... He had simply been standing, deafened by the screech and explosion of artillery; a terrified boy in an ill-
fitting uniform in a front-line trench. Suddenly, he was gone.”

The deadly toll of the war on Newfoundlanders such as McWhirter remains poignant, a century later. The legacy and lessons of the First World War for Newfoundland and Labrador has been the subject of a series of articles commissioned by Action Canada and published by The Telegram throughout the summer. It will also be the focus of an Action Canada Public Dialogue on Tuesday, Sept. 1, in St. John’s.

And a visit to Gallipoli on the 100th anniversary of McWhirter’s death by a group of Newfoundlanders, including former lieutenant-governor John Crosbie and his wife, Jane, will commemorate these sacrifices and achievements.

Best known — yet, historians say, still not well understood — was the disaster that befell the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916. Of the 801 soldiers who took part in the British offensive along the River Somme in France, 324 men were killed or missing and presumed dead; 386 were wounded. It was a scale of death and tragedy that Newfoundland, with its population of 240,000, had never experienced.

Women took on a greater role throughout the war, both at home and through service overseas, for example as nurses’ helpers in the British Voluntary Aid Detachment. After the conflict, their involvement would be part of the argument for extending the vote to women.

Newfoundland families were permanently changed by the events of the war, with brothers enlisting together, both in the Newfoundland Regiment and the Royal Navy, compounding the tragedy for loved ones at home.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Newfoundland’s veterans continued to serve their country with honour and distinction. Several won elected office. Others formed associations to campaign for pensions and jobs for veterans, to create memorials to remember those who fought and, in too many instances were gravely wounded or died.

With the assistance of The Telegram, Action Canada has been honoured to have had six great Newfoundlanders tell these stories of Newfoundland in the First World War.

Our thanks to Steve Bartlett, Russell Wangersky and Pam Frampton for their collaboration in publishing the articles and to Larry Dohey, manager of collections and special projects at The Rooms, Provincial Archives Divisions, for providing photos to accompany them.

Cathy Beehan is the Newfoundland-born founding CEO of Action Canada, a premiere national leadership program.