

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