

## SOUTH AFRICANS

**D**ELVILLE Wood, Butte de Warlencourt. Death inhabits the corner of the wood and the blood of thousands of soldiers fills the furrows of the fields of the Somme and the Artois. A catastrophe for the 1st South African Infantry Brigade.

Having taken part in military operations in Egypt and Libya, South African troops came ashore in Marseille on 20 April 1916 and headed north to the trenches. Acclimatisation was harsh in Flanders. On 2 July, the brigade entered the Battle of the Somme head on. 537 men lost their lives in the first week of fighting alone. And this was just the beginning as the fighting frenzy continued. On 15 July, the South Africans (121 officers and 3,032 men) were assigned the mission of taking Delville Wood and to hold it whatever the cost. The Germans outnumbered them and the result was a slaughter. A week later, the brigade was left with only 780 able-bodied men; 763 had been killed and 1,709 wounded.

War fails to learn from its lessons. On 12 October 1916, the South African brigade was once again annihilated at the Butte de Warlencourt, a hill just 50ft in height. Losses were high. No rest was in store and from 1917 the South Africans saw action at Arras, Ypres and elsewhere. "Reduced to the size of a battalion" in March 1918 during the German offensive, the valiant brigade distinguished itself in Meteren in July. It is estimated that 5,000 South Africans (almost all of them white) were killed, which brings us to the subject of the black workers of the SANLC (South African Native Labour Corps), from which 25,000 volunteers left Cape Town between October 1916 and January 1918. Alongside Egyptians, Chinese, Fijians etc, they unloaded millions of tonnes of munitions and supplies in the ports of Dunkirk, Calais, Boulogne-sur-Mer etc. In Europe, the SANLC lost 1,120 men, and those who returned to South Africa did not even have the right to receive the Inter Allied Victory Medal, such were the odious effects of apartheid.

## NEWFOUNDLANDERS

**F**IVE impressive bronze caribou memorials in Beaumont-Hamel, Courtrai, Gueudecourt, Masnières and Monchy-le-Preux immortalise the suffering and worth of soldiers from Newfoundland.

This province, the oldest colony of the British Empire, had a population of 250,000 inhabitants in 1914. Its citizens participated in the Great War and during the four years of the conflict, the Newfoundland Regiment mobilised over 6,000 men. 1,200 died in Belgium, in the north, the Somme and the Pas-de-Calais.

1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, near Beaumont-Hamel: 802 Newfoundlanders attack the enemy trenches... the following morning only 68 of them were still capable of fighting. On 12 October 1916, the same regiment is involved in the Battle of Le Transloy and takes the German entrenchments in Gueudecourt.

On 14 April 1917, the 1st battalion of the Essex Regiment and the Newfoundland Regiment capture Infantry Hill to the

east of Monchy-le-Preux. However, they walk straight into a huge German counter-attack and almost all are killed or captured. In Monchy, the military leaders of the Newfoundlanders put up heroic resistance (thanks to their elite snipers) to all enemy attempts to take the village. A dozen or so men succeed in holding 200-300 Germans at bay for four hours before relief arrived. The Newfoundland Regiment is almost obliterated: 166 dead, 141 wounded, 153 taken prisoner. At the end of June 1917, the Newfoundlanders were posted near Langemark in Belgium, returning to France in mid October, distinguishing themselves once more near Masnières. Their determination resulted in the king of England awarding the title "Royal" to the Newfoundland Regiment, who, in September 1918, took part in the last major offensive of the war around Ypres.

The "best sniper" in the regiment was one of the fifteen Inuit volunteers from Labrador, John Shiwak, a hunter and trapper who was killed during the Battle of Cambrai on 20 November 1917.



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## FOR BELGIAN refugees in France: a civilian hospital in Neuville-sous-Montreuil

**W**HEN Belgium was invaded by the Germans in 1914, many of its inhabitants fled. As was the case elsewhere in France, the Montreuil-sur-Mer area witnessed the influx of a large number of these refugees. Initially, they were warmly received. However, after four years, having all these new mouths to feed was taking its toll and these poor Belgians were sometimes referred to as the "the Bosch of the North". However, this exhausted population, some of whom were wounded, needed to be taken care of, hence the establishment of a hospital for them.

To invade France, the Germans had to pass through Belgium and violate its neutrality. Consequently, they declared war on their neighbours on 3 August 1914. The entire country was occupied incredibly quickly. King Albert, who was at the front with his soldiers, was particularly popular with the French public. He was decorated with the Military Medal, and a "Belgian flag day", on which badges were sold for the benefit of refugees, was created.

The French public's affection even led to a dessert of Austrian origin being renamed "café liégeois" ! The Belgian Minister

for War set up his headquarters in Dunkirk and the army set up military hospitals in Calais, Normandy and Brittany. At the same time, the influx of refugees meant that civilian hospitals needed to be established. The one at the Chartreuse Notre-Dame des Prés in Neuville-sous-Montreuil, which existed from 1915 to April 1919, was "placed under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen and His Excellency the Belgian Interior Minister". Yann Hodicq, a First World War enthusiast and author of "Montreuil-sur-Mer: 1914-1918" explains that "the hospital had 700



A Belgian army camp near Arras. Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection

beds, and the medical staff from Belgium was made up of nuns, a chaplain and two or three doctors." According to Yann Hodicq, it is impossible to work out now many patients were treated there : "one supposes that the number is very high if

you look at the numbers who died there. 610 were registered with the town hall in Neuville alone...", not counting the times when military personnel were also treated there. On some occasions the number of dead was so high that two bodies had to be buried

at once. To deal with the ever-increasing roll call of wounded arriving unexpectedly at the railway station in Montreuil, the hospital was forced to evacuate its most able-bodied patients to other towns on a regular basis in order to free up beds.

