

5. Newfoundland

In 1940 Newfoundland was not yet a province of Canada and was under direct control of Britain. It was called a Commission Government because the island colony had had serious financial trouble during the Depression years forcing Britain to intervene. Newfoundland was vital to the defense of Canada and indeed, North America, and hence Canadian infantry units were stationed there for defense against possible German attacks. You have to remember that this was the era of the mighty German battleship Bismarck.

Able and Baker Companies with part of Headquarters Company remained in Botwood, on Exploits Bay, after our arrival in early August. Charlie and Don Companies, with the Commanding Officer and the rest of Headquarters Company, headed by train to Gander Airport.¹ The main job at Gander was guarding the bombers and other planes against saboteurs. Gander became one of the main refueling stops for bombers being flown from the U.S. to Britain.

We replaced The Black Watch (of the 2nd Division) who had been there since June and they were only too happy to go – conditions were primitive, to say the least. They at least had had decent summer weather. It was close to the end of summer and Newfoundland is never as warm as southern Ontario. The two men who were inadvertently left behind by The Black Watch, mentioned in the Regimental History, were placed in our company. They were Riflemen John Fells and John Showers. Showers would be one of 61 fatalities suffered by the QOR on D-Day.

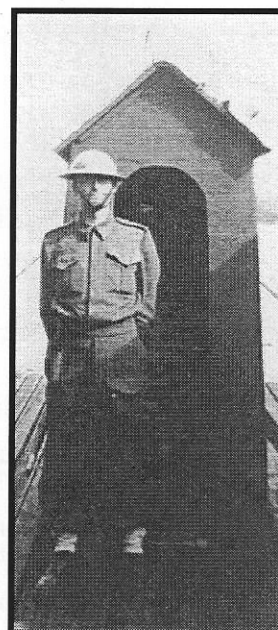
¹ Until 1942 we were on the British phonetic alphabet. The first four letters were: AK, Beer, Charlie and Don. Then we adopted the American terms: Alpha, Baker, Charlie and Dog. In Italy, D Coy of the Hasty P's had two OCs named Don, Maj (later LCol) Don Cameron and Maj (later LCol) Donald Ross. Neither officer liked the term "Dog" so we called it "Don's" Company.

Charlie Company was organized on the following basis: 13 Platoon was comprised of men who had previous militia experience or Regular Force military service. 14 Platoon was generally made up of fellows who were in their late twenties and thirties such as Dick Ayton and Len Craig. 15 Platoon was largely made up of the younger ones, 18 to 22 years of age with no military training.



Charlie Company exchanged with Able in early September and took up the Botwood duties. One of the responsibilities while Charlie Company was stationed at Botwood was sending a four-man detachment to the outpost at Lewisporte, a hamlet on the southern side of the Bay of Exploits. While the weather was still good in September, I went out with a relief of riflemen to spell off my friend, Sergeant Dave Hazzard (photo above) who had been at Lewisporte for about a week. Hazzard was later commissioned and killed in action with Baker Company on July 5, 1944 in Normandy while moving up to Carpiquet.

We had to take a small boat to get to them. We tried not to keep them out there long. It was fairly tedious watching the sea for German ships or subs and there were very few distractions.



Lewisporte Outpost Trip – September 1940

Upper left: Boat used to travel on Brown's Arm to Lewisporte from Botwood

Upper right: CSM Harry Fox and Rifleman J. Haynes on board boat

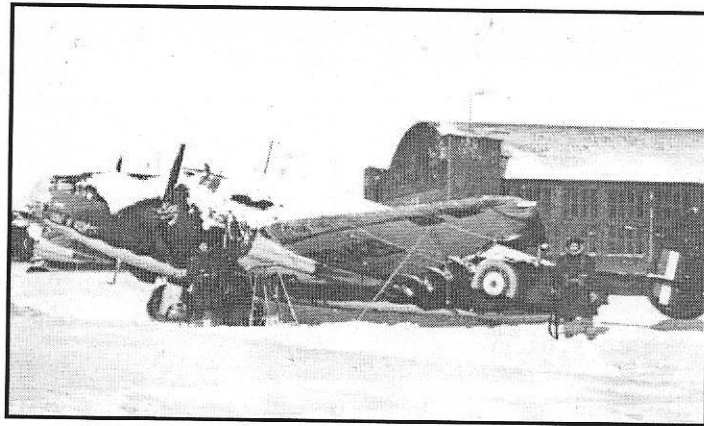
Lower left: Sgt Ed Fox & Cpl Joe Gould on board

Lower right: Lewisporte Guardhouse – CSM Fox

Even though life was a struggle in Newfoundland, there was the occasional humorous moment. For instance, one day, I had the company drawn up perfectly. Not a man was out of line. The equipment gleamed in the autumn sunshine. I gave the stand at ease order and began my address. "Now listen to this," I told them, trying to be sure their attention would be riveted. Sheep were grazing on the hillside behind me. "Now, listen. . . " I started again, allowing for a small pause. This was the moment one of the sheep chose to speak up. "Ba –a

-a" The men collapsed. There were times when life was not the easiest, even for a sergeant major.

It was while we were at Botwood that the first serious winter storm of the year developed. Two feet of snow fell and the temperature dropped to -20 C. The storm lasted for nine days beginning October 18th.

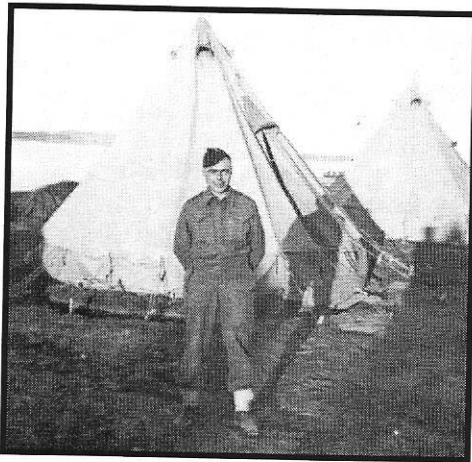


Gander Airport – October 1940 – after the first storm of the year

People often forget that the Battle of the Atlantic began very early in the War as Britain was dependant on Canada for many of its necessities as well as weapons of war. The Germans sent several battle cruisers into the Atlantic in 1940 to try to cut off Britain's lifeline from North America. The first two that went up and down the Atlantic raising havoc with the convoys were the *Gneisenau* and the *Scharnhorst*. These two German ships sank the British carrier *Glorious* off Norway in May 1940. This was before the U-boats were available in large numbers. From late 1941, the subs conducted the main German offensive in the Atlantic. We had one advantage over the Germans in that we got meteorological reports from Northern Ireland and Iceland. There was a rumour that the Germans had established a weather station on Greenland but that was never proven to the best of my knowledge. This was before the *Bismarck* and the *Prince Eugen* were able to break out from the Baltic into the Atlantic in May 1941. By that time the

other two battle cruisers were at port at Brest, on the Brittany coast of France.

It was part of the "big picture" of why The Queen's Own was stationed in Newfoundland.



Our Accommodations in Botwood (Cpl later CSM Bill Wallis, wounded on D-Day)

"There was a major kerfuffle one day in the Fall while we were at Botwood. We were told to expect a visit from the Admiral Scheer, a German pocket battleship. We made ready to move out. . . The Commanding Officer,

LCol MacKendrick, met with the mayor of Botwood and announced that we were about to blow up the railway, military personnel were withdrawing to Grand Falls and that the best way to protect the town would be to declare it an open city. The poor mayor was stunned. When he got his breath back, he reminded the Colonel that the QOR were supposed to be there protecting Botwood, not deserting it.

The plight of the Botwood man became worse when he was asked if he had any idea of the destruction an eleven-inch shell could cause? Six and the whole town would be in flames. The near-tragedy vanished when the Jerries decided to stay at sea."

On their off hours, the men would often go fishing in a local stream for



trout, with swords, (in Rifle regiments) if you can believe it. The water was only six inches deep and the trout were plentiful. Another favourite pastime was drinking,

naturally enough. The men's canteen was reached by walking along the narrow gauge railway track. It was necessary to check the line to ensure that no rifleman was passed out on it, as the train schedules were quite erratic. The men developed quite a taste for Newfie Screech – the local rum. By the end of four months on the "Rock," many of our lads were seasoned drinkers and figured they could drink with the best of them.

"I needed some lessons on the motorbike. We were going down a street in a group. The rider ahead put on some speed. I did the same. Ahead was a barracks block with a flight of wooden steps in front. As the bike drew near, for some unknown reason it wheeled left, pranged the steps and hurled me into a mess of what had become brand new kindling. The street instantly filled with men in loud voices asking what had happened and equally loud voices explaining. . . what had happened. They picked me out of the mess, strapped me onto a stretcher and I was taken to the aid post. There was nothing wrong, not a scratch, as it turned out. In the Army this was my first escape from injury or worse. There were many more, for the next five years, in England, in the Italian fighting . . . missed shaking hands with a mortar bomb . . . I was a lucky man" (In *Canadians: A Battalion At War*, P. 251-2).

We did have a padre assigned to us while we were in Newfoundland. The only story I know about him concerns a visit he made to one isolated outpost on a hill. The men had done some "scrounging" and came up with fresh eggs to eat. The padre came up one day for a visit and while there he ate with them, consuming all the eggs. The men were not impressed! He did hold Sunday church services in town but we hardly ever saw him. We did much better with Padre Cecil Stuart in Sussex and then Jack Clough, whom everyone in the Regiment admired and remembers fondly.



**CSM Harry Fox (third from left back row) & Charlie Company NCOs.
Botwood, Newfoundland, September 1940.**

**Cpl G. Ibbitson (back row- far right - KIA Carpiquet – 9 July 1944; Cpl J. Gould;
L/Sgt Clay Bell (third from right back row)– Wounded 18 July 1944 Giberville; Cpl
L. Knowles- back row 4th from right - KIA 9 Sept 1944 - La Capelle; Sgt Ed Fox;
Cpl R. Rea (later Lt) – lost a leg on D-Day;
Front: L- R: Cpls Van Horne, Morton & Bennett.**

Towards the end of November we knew we were moving when an advance party from The Royal Rifles (a sister Rifle regiment from Quebec) appeared in Botwood. Their regiment was not placed in one of the first five divisions for overseas service as it was deemed by the highers-up to be “not up to combat standard.” Yet despite this perception, the Liberal government of MacKenzie King still allowed The Royal Rifles, along with The Winnipeg Grenadiers, to go to Hong Kong in 1941 as a token defense garrison. We were in Aldershot when we heard that they had been sent to Hong Kong and for a short time, were quite envious. This was before Pearl Harbor and no one really imagined them fighting against a battle-hardened force like the Japanese Army. Incidentally, one of our original “potato sackers” named Barnett, B 64068, took sick while we were in Sussex and didn’t sail with the Regiment to England. Somehow he found his way to The Royal Rifles went to Hong Kong and was killed in action there. Barnett was the only QOR rifleman killed in the Asian theater of war.

Charlie Company was in the first “flight” to depart on the *SS New Northlands* on November 30th for Halifax. This was the only ship available and

would hold just a couple of hundred soldiers. It was winter and bitterly cold on board the ship. We wore all our winter kit and balaclavas (photo below). The seas were rough and many were seasick. We took several days to reach safe harbor in Nova Scotia. From there we took a train to Sussex, New Brunswick to join the rest of the newly created 8th Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division.

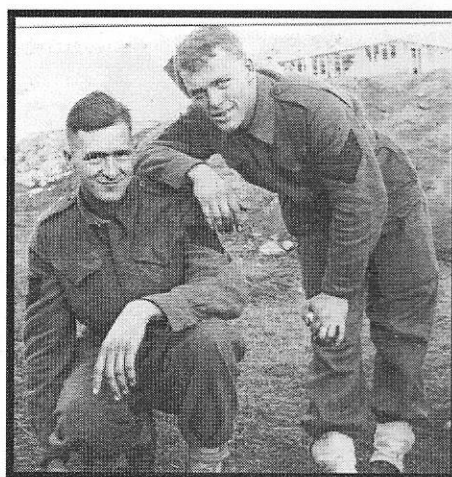


**CSM Harry Fox (left) with some men of Charlie Company –
Rfn L. Craig, Cpl G. Morrison, Rfns Brown & Bloxham
SS New Northlands - November 30, 1940**

In reflecting on what Newfoundland had meant for the Regiment, Charlie Martin commented that: “. . . the Queen’s Own Rifles were firmly welded into a family unit” (*Canadians*, p. 303). Newfoundland had some benefits for the Regiment, primarily in the area of physical toughening and adapting to adverse circumstances. I think we got shortchanged however, on the normal procedure of training for an infantry battalion. For example, we should have spent the first two months doing nothing but parade square “bashing”, kit inspections and building up our physical fitness. Then mastering the basic weapon, the rifle, followed by the Bren gun, the mortars and so on. We didn’t get enough time in the period before Newfoundland to do these things. In Newfoundland we did finally get rifles and spent some time on improvised ranges as well as map and compass

work (navigation). Still, we were far from a well-trained outfit at that point. We did very few rucksack marches in Newfoundland and spent much of our time improvising and adapting to the harsh living conditions

6. Back to Canada: Sussex, N.B.



Upper: Sergeant Ed Fox – Sword Fighting – January 1941
Lower: Lance Sergeant Clay Bell & Sergeant Eddie Fox

It was in Sussex, New Brunswick that we started to get into more formal training for combat. We did more rifle shooting, rucksack marches, unarmed combat and some communications work. An NCO school was established there and various courses given to our corporals and sergeants.