

THE GAMBLIN' CLOTH

**This unique piece of WWI history
offers a rare glimpse of how
soldiers sometimes passed the
time between engagements.**

By Lester Green

In July 2016, a large package arrived for me at the Hodge's Cove Post Office from Fred Shaw of Reading, Massachusetts. His father, Daniel Shaw, was a former resident of Little Heart's Ease who had served with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the First World War. At home, I opened the package with the excitement of a child at Christmas, desperately fighting to control my emotions while peering at history from 100 years ago.



I was researching and writing the stories of our boys from the Southwest Arm area who had served with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. I contacted Fred when I began to work on his father's story. He provided me with additional information and photographs, including a rare group photo of eight of our boys in uniform (see p. 155). Over the weeks that followed, his dad's story was completed and published on June 23, 2016, in the local newspaper, the *Packet*. A copy was mailed to Fred and his family. A few weeks later, I received a phone call from Fred informing me he had mailed me a package as a means of thanking me for writing his dad's story.

I was extremely excited to open this large package from Fred. While my wife stood watching, I carefully removed an item from among the protective pink Styrofoam peanuts. The black frame held a homemade Crown and Anchor cloth. It was affectionately referred to by Fred as "Father's gamblin' cloth." He told me that the cup and dice were misplaced, but he would locate the items and send them along later.

I sat captivated with this piece of history from the Great War, admiring it 100 years after it had been dragged through the fields of Europe. Crease lines were evident, similar to those that would be found on a folded military flag, indicating the game

Above: Private Daniel Shaw. *Courtesy of Fred Shaw*



Lester Green (left) and Fred Shaw discuss the Gamblin' Cloth.
Courtesy of Fred Shaw

had been spread out and folded back up many times by its owner. All six symbols of the Crown and Anchor game drawn on the canvas were in excellent shape, and the anchor was outlined in great detail. This was fitting for this soldier who was born into a fishing family and had proudly sailed on his father's schooner, the *Seven Brothers*. Clearly, this handmade game had provided many hours of entertainment for Daniel Shaw and his comrades as they gathered around waiting for their next round of orders.

In his book, *Now God be Thanked*, John Masters describes the popular Crown and Anchor game, commonly played by members of the Navy and Army. It involved three dice and a piece of cloth marked with six symbols: a crown, an anchor, a club, a

heart, a spade and a diamond. These were fondly referred to as the Major, the Mud-hook, the Shamrock, the Jam-tart, the Curse and the Kinkie. Each side of the dice had one of six symbols. The bet was placed on one of the symbols on the laid-out canvas. If the soldier's bet came up when the dice were rolled from a leather cup, the banker paid out. If the three dice showed two anchors and one heart, those with bets placed on anchor and heart received a payout. The person with bets on the anchor received twice the wager than that of the heart. The odds, of course, were always stacked in favour of the owner of the game.

The homemade gambling cloth would have provided hours of entertainment to the soldiers during their leisure time and an opportunity to

socialize with their comrades. For some, the game became addictive, eventually leading the British forces to ban the game.

We can only assume that this was also true for the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment under British command. This led to an underground secrecy of the game among the soldiers, as they would gather around the cloth answering the owner's cry: "Whose for the old killick? Anyone for the Ole King Teddy's hat? What about a bit the ladies crave for? Come on now, boys, place your bet."

This makes this "Gambling Cloth" a piece of unique Royal Newfoundland Regiment history, preserved by Pte Shaw and his family – an intriguing piece of our past. It is surely among the rarest items ever entrusted to me.

Unfortunately, we'll never know

the many stories that this cloth was a part of as it was secretly carried around by Pte Shaw as he and his unit travelled across France, Belgium and into Germany. But the gambling game's existence serves as a reminder that even in harsh times, these young men sought a means of occasional escape from the brutality of war.

Some of these cloths are preserved in museums in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Now we can proudly display Private Daniel Shaw's cloth in his hometown of Little Heart's Ease and share it with the people of the Southwest Arm region. 🇬🇧



Cup and Dice
Courtesy of Lester Green



Pte Daniel Shaw (back row with pipe) and soldiers from the Southwest Arm area of Trinity Bay. *Courtesy of Fred Shaw and Audrey Drodge*