



TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

Beaumont-Hamel

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland story is the most sacred one the island keeps, and it did not happen on the island at all. It happened far across the ocean, on a July morning in 1916, on a field in France called Beaumont-Hamel. And in about half an hour on that morning, Newfoundland lost almost an entire generation of her young men. To this day, while the rest of Canada celebrates on the first of July, Newfoundland bows its head.



CAROL

While the rest of the country celebrates, they mourn. Marty, that tells me everything before you even begin. What happened at Beaumont-Hamel?



MARTY

It was the first day of the Battle of the Somme, Carol, the bloodiest day in the history of the British army. And there, in the line, was the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, near eight hundred young men from the outports and from St. John's, most of them volunteers, fishermen and clerks and boys who had never seen a war, who had crossed the ocean to serve. And on the morning of the first of July, they were ordered to go over the top, up out of their trench, and to advance across open ground toward the German lines.



CAROL

Open ground, Marty. Toward the guns. Had the attack, the ones before them, had it gone well?



MARTY

It had already failed, Carol, that is the unbearable part. The waves that went before them that morning had been cut to pieces. The German machine guns were untouched and waiting. And by the time the order came to the Newfoundlanders, the ground ahead was already carpeted with the dead and dying of the earlier attacks. The Newfoundland Regiment had to climb out of their trench, in full daylight, and walk forward into machine-gun fire across a field where everyone could see there was no hope. And they did it, Carol. They climbed out, and they walked forward, because they were ordered to, and they did not break.



CAROL

They walked forward knowing. Oh, Marty. What kind of courage is that.



MARTY

The purest and most terrible kind there is, Carol. They came up out of the trench into a wall of fire. There was one lone tree out in that open ground, a bare and blasted thing the men called the Danger Tree, because the German gunners had it ranged, and to reach it was almost certain death, and yet it was the only landmark, and so the Newfoundlanders pushed toward it and fell around it in heaps. Most of them never got even that far. They were cut down within yards of their own trench, walking forward into the guns, and it was over, Carol, in about thirty minutes.



CAROL

Thirty minutes. Marty. How many? How many of the eight hundred?



MARTY

The next morning, Carol, when they called the roll, to see who was left to answer, only about sixty-eight men stood up to answer their names. Of the roughly eight hundred who went forward, some seven hundred were killed, wounded, or missing. Nearly the whole regiment, gone, in half an hour, on a field in France. There was scarcely a family in Newfoundland that did not lose a son, a brother, a father, a sweetheart, on that one July morning. An entire generation of the island's young men, cut down in a single stroke.



CAROL

An entire generation. Marty, a small island like that, all its young men. How does a place even survive a wound like that?

MARTY

It survives by remembering, Carol, and by grief that never quite heals, which is its own kind of faithfulness. When the news came back to Newfoundland, the whole island went into mourning, and it has never entirely come out. They call the first of July Memorial Day there, and it is a day of sorrow, of bowed heads and the last post and the reading of the names. And there is a monument on that field in France now, on the very ground, a great bronze caribou, the emblem of the regiment, standing on a rise and bellowing out across the old battlefield toward the enemy lines, forever. And you can still see the trenches there, and the shell holes, and yes, Carol, the Danger Tree still stands.

CAROL

A bronze caribou crying out across the field forever. Oh, Marty. And the tree is still there. That gives me chills right to the bone. Why do you think Newfoundland holds this one so much closer than any of its other losses?

MARTY

Because of how complete it was, Carol, and how willing. It was not an accident, like the ice. It was not fate. It was a whole generation of young men who chose to serve, who crossed an ocean for a cause, and who, when they were ordered to walk into certain death, walked, without breaking, out of duty and courage and love of their comrades. There is nothing to blame and nothing to fix, Carol. There is only the pure, staggering fact of their sacrifice. And a people cannot help but hold something like that forever, because to forget it would be a second death, and worse.

CAROL

To forget them would be worse than losing them. Yes, Marty. So they carry it, generation after generation, on purpose.

MARTY

On purpose, Carol, and with pride under the sorrow. Because those men gave everything, and they did it as Newfoundlanders, and the island will not let that go. So tonight we stand with them too. We remember the young men of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who climbed out of the trench on the first of July, 1916, and walked forward into the guns at Beaumont-Hamel, and did not come home. We remember that only sixty-eight answered the roll. And we hold, as the island holds, the forget-me-not, the little blue flower they wear there still, so that no one ever does. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am wearing a forget-me-not in my heart for the young men of Newfoundland. Hold your people close, honour the ones who gave everything, and come back to the fire.