

Private John Charles Cole (Number 1075145) of the 67th Canadian Pioneers Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on *Vimy Ridge*.

His occupations prior to military service documented as those of both fisherman and labourer, John Charles Cole appears to left no record of his departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia*.

****As his children appear to have been born in Newfoundland – the last in 1916 – it may be that he had travelled for only the purpose of enlistment.***

(continued)

On May 29 – the date confirmed by his pay record - of 1916, John Charles Cole appeared for enlistment in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, before presenting himself for medical examination and attestation four days later, on June 2.

It was also on that same May 29 that Private Cole was *taken on strength* by the 4th Pioneer Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Almost nine weeks later, on July 27, the Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Weatherbe, concluded the formalities of his enlistment when he declared – on paper – of Pioneer Cole that... *having been final approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

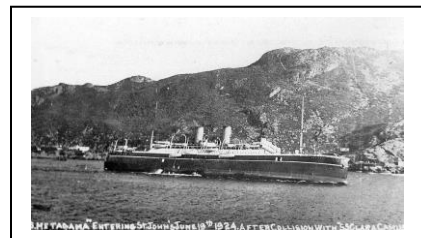
It was as of the first day of September of 1916 that Pioneer Cole began to allocate a monthly fifteen dollars drawn from his pay to his wife. This was likely done – as had been the writing of a will, on August 10, in which he bequeathed his all to his wife - as part of the preparation for *overseas service* which, for him, was not long in coming. Where exactly Pioneer Cole had been during this time is suggested in a letter written by another soldier of the 4th Pioneer Battalion to his home in which he informs his reader that the unit had been training at St. Andrews in New Brunswick and that it was from there that he and the Battalion had then travelled to Halifax*.

(Right: *The photograph of the 4th Canadian Pioneers Battalion training camp at St. Andrews – originally from a vintage post-card – is by kind courtesy of Ms. Brenda Orr from whose Private Collection it comes.*)



**In fact St. Andrews, New Brunswick, is where the Battalion was mobilized in the month of May, earlier that year.*

On September 12 of 1916, the personnel of the 4th Pioneer Battalion – thirty-two officers and seven-hundred eighty *other ranks* - embarked on board the SS *Metagama* for the trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom, the three ships of the convoy – and an armoured-cruiser escort – leaving Halifax harbour on the morning of the 13th. After an apparently rough voyage, *Metagama* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool during the evening of September 22.



Private Cole was not alone in taking ship for the voyage. In addition to his own 4th Pioneer Battalion, also on board *Metagama* were six other units, all of them of the Canadian Field Artillery: the staff of the 14th Brigade; the 55th, 56th, 58th and 66th Batteries – these comprising the fire-power of the 14th Brigade; and also the 14th Brigade Ammunition Column.

(Right above: *In 1924, Metagama was rammed off Cape Race by the SS Clara Camus. The picture here is of Metagama being towed into St. John's, Newfoundland, for provisional repairs. – the image of the SS Metagama is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)



(Right: An 18-pdr (eighteen-pounder) field gun, the mainstay of British and Empire (Commonwealth) field artillery forces during the Great War – photographed at the Imperial War Museum, London, in or about 2011)

Having arrived in England, the 4th Pioneer Battalion boarded a train for the overnight journey to *Witley Camp*, it recently having recently been established in the southern part of the English county of Surrey. For exactly how long Pioneer Cole's unit was to remain at *Witley* is unclear, but for Pioneer Cole himself the answer was... a mere eleven days.

On October 4 he was admitted into hospital at *Witley Camp* to be treated for a venereal problem. Two days afterwards, he was forwarded to the Connaught Military Hospital located at the British Army complex of Aldershot for further medical attention. It was not to be until October 24 that Pioneer Cole was discharged from there back to *duty* with the 4th Pioneer Battalion.

For a period of about two months during the autumn of 1916 there apparently existed in the Canadian Army two 4th Pioneer Battalions: the one into which, formed in New Brunswick earlier that year, John Charles Cole had enlisted; and a second one which had been originally organized in June of 1915 as the 67th (*Western Scottish*) Canadian Infantry Battalion.

This latter formation had sailed for the United Kingdom on board His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in April of 1916, before being despatched to France from England on August 14th, there to serve as the 67th *Pioneer* Battalion with the Canadian 4th Division. In September of 1916 this 67th Pioneer Battalion had been re-designated as the 4th Pioneer Battalion, as it was *the* Pioneer Battalion of that Canadian 4th Division.

But it was apparently not until November 7 that the order came from above that the... 4th *Pioneer Bn* – from New Brunswick - *will be known as the 5th Pioneer Bn*. This likely made little difference to many of the personnel of Pioneer Cole's unit – whether still at *Whitley Camp* or by that time moved to *Camp Bramshott* is not clear – even when a further draft of 5th Pioneer Battalion new-comers arrived from Canada on December 6-7, as by then many of Pioneer Cole's contingent – as well as Private Cole himself - had been transferred elsewhere.

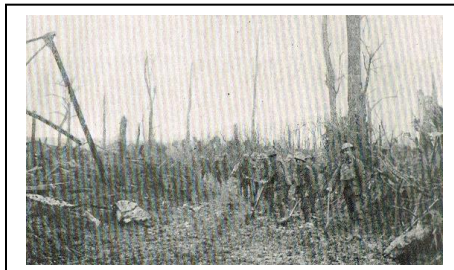
As it happens, all this bureaucratic furore appears to have been for nought: the 67th Battalion War Diarist was apparently unaware of any such change, and none of his superiors seem to have chosen to inform him of it. The monthly title page of the supposed 4th Pioneer Battalion War Diary continued to identify the unit as the 67th Canadian Pioneer Battalion of the 4th Canadian Division until it, the Pioneer unit, was disbanded at the end of April 1917.*

But, for a period, the Canadian Army appears to have had two 4th Pioneer Battalions – and then it had none!

**A little bit of regimental hubris and tradition may have had something to do with it.*

Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction, repair and improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, telephone communications, roads and the like. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel were chosen from amongst other attributes for their physique and also for their experience in such work. Often working under fire, the Pioneers shared the dangers of life at the front with all the other troops which were stationed there.

(Right: *Canadian sappers building a road somewhere... 'in liberated territory'* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)



On December 2, Pioneer Cole was ordered from the 5th Pioneer Battalion to the Canadian Pioneer Training Depot at nearby Crowborough. Then on the 13th day of that same month* he was transferred to the nominal roll of the 67th Pioneer Battalion which was by then already, of course, serving on the Continent.

Private Cole was therefore soon to be on his way across the English Channel to *active service* in France.

**Although his pay records do not note the change until January 1 of the New Year, 1917.*

He made the short sea-passage on the night of December 13-14, 1916, likely from the English south-coast port of Southampton. On that December 14 his files show Private Cole to have been *taken on strength* at the Canadian General Base Depot, by then established in the vicinity of the French port-city of Le Havre where he had landed, the city on the estuary of the River Seine.



Twenty-five days later, on January 8, Pioneer Cole was despatched from the Base Depot to join the parent unit of the 67th Pioneer Battalion *in the field*. This he did on January 11, 1917, three days later again.

(Right above: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

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The 67th Pioneer Battalion was destined to serve on the *Western Front* for only a bare eight months. As has already been seen, the Battalion had originally been an infantry formation but in May of 1916 it had been re-designated as a Canadian Pioneer unit and had been sent to serve as such with the 4th Canadian Division.



It had arrived in France on August 14, 1916, landing at Le Havre before almost immediately being sent north into the *Kingdom of Belgium* where it de-trained four days later, on August 18, in the town of Poperinghe.

From there the 67th Battalion marched to its camp from where on the days that followed, its different companies were allocated work in an area to the south-west of the already-battered city of Ypres.

(Preceding page: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - showing the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

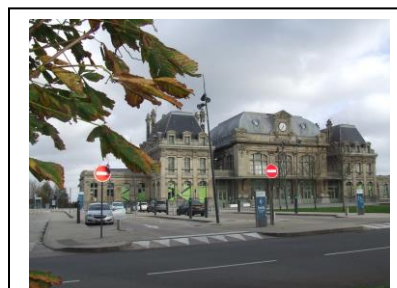
On August 22 the unit had incurred its first fatality, an un-named man of 'B' Company, during the building of a C.T. (*communication trench*) at the south end of *Poppy Lane*.

The 67th Pioneer Battalion remained in the area of Voormezeele and Dickebusch until September 24. By this time the units of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Canadian Divisions had all been – or were being - withdrawn from their sectors, had then undergone or were undergoing training in north-western France, and had left or were about to leave to fight in the *First Battle of the Somme*.

The 67th Pioneer Battalion and the other units of the 4th Canadian Division – all newly-arrived on the Continent during that past August - were now about to follow suit.

Two days after departing from the area of Ypres and indeed, from Belgium, during the afternoon of September 18, the 67th Battalion arrived in the community of Serques, there to be billeted and in the vicinity of which, to train. The unit remained there until October 2.

(Right: *The once-impressive railway station at St-Omer - today in sore need of revitalization - through which Pioneer Cole's 67th Pioneer Battalion passed on October 2, 1916 – photograph from 2016*)



On that latter date the Battalion marched to the large centre of St-Omer, billeted there overnight, and then boarded a train on the following day at six in the morning. Some nine hours later, in mid-afternoon, the train arrived in the provincial town of Doullens. From there, for the next four days, the Pioneers marched eastwards and towards the sound of the guns. They had arrived on *the Somme*.



(Right: *The quiet country-town of Doullens as it appeared just prior to the period of the Great War during which it played a role as a medical centre – from a vintage post-card*)

By that October of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for three months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.



On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

(Preceding page: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette* – photograph from 2015)

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

From Doullens the community of Aveluy had been the 67th Pioneer Battalion's destination, some three kilometres to the north of the much larger town of Albert. The unit arrived there on October 6, at a time when the first Canadian infantry battalions to serve at *the Somme* were already in the process of being withdrawn and being sent northwards towards the sectors in-between Béthune and Arras, now to be a Canadian responsibility.

It was to be November 27 before the 67th Pioneer Battalion was to turn its back on *the Somme* and march away. The unit was among the last of the Canadian units to leave, their places now taken once more by troops from the British Isles. Being Pioneer troops, they had not been directly involved in any of the infantry operations of those almost eight weeks, but they had played an important role:

Building ammunition dumps, communication trenches, dug-outs, first-aid stations, support trenches, tram-lines and railways, roads and huts... Then wiring, burying cable, filling sand-bags, stretchering the wounded, tunnelling, carrying supplies and ammunition, unloading waggons and caring for the animals who drew them...



(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

Much of this work had been behind the ever-active areas of *Regina* and *Kenora Trenches* and of *Sausage Valley*, and *all* work had been undertaken within range of the enemy artillery. The Pioneers, moreover, if one has confidence in the Battalion War Diary, were not relieved by other units – the 67th served continuously from October 6 until November 27: casualties for this period, 16 killed, fifty-nine wounded – according to the War Diary count.



(Right above: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on November 11, 1916* – photograph from 2014)

The unit left as it had arrived, passing through Doullens – although on this occasion there was no train. Having trained for a week in the vicinity of Hermin the unit eventually marched into camp at Villers-au-Bois. It had marched west from *the Somme* to Doullens before turning northward to pass to the west of Arras and beyond, arriving at Villers-au-Bois on December 15, a transfer which had taken a tiring eighteen days. There was to be no respite: on the following morning there were orders for dug-outs to be constructed.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *A detachment of Canadian troops going up to the forward area at an unspecified time during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

In the trenches the Canadian battalions had once more settled into the rigours and the routines – and tedium - of everyday trench warfare – perhaps, however, a welcome respite for those who had experienced *the Somme*; infantry action for the most part was on a local scale – patrolling and raids – with occasionally the latter being delivered at battalion strength.



Casualties for the most part during this period were to be due to enemy artillery with snipers also taking their toll. However, it was by far sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, dental work that kept the medical services busy.

Such was the situation which greeted Private Cole and his draft on the day that they reported *to duty*.

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On that particular snowy day of January 11 of the New Year, 1917, the 67th Pioneer Battalion was still encamped at Villers-au-Bois, a quasi-permanent site behind the forward area to the north-west of the city of Arras, where it was engaged in various tasks: trench maintenance, dugout and railway construction, and the building of a new camp. There is no mention in the Battalion War Diary of any re-enforcements having arrived on that date, but such an occurrence is not unusual.

Those new quarters – *Rose Camp* by name – were to be occupied by the builders themselves twelve days later, on January 23. The *venue* may have changed for the 67th Pioneer Battalion and Pioneer Cole, but their labours were to remain the same.

In fact, the Battalion was to remain based at *Rose Camp* up until – and after – the start of the *Battle of Arras* on April 9. The unit's work also remained much the same except that, as the date of the offensive approached, there were further tasks added to the list of things to do: the laying of pipe-lines, excavating recesses for gas cylinders, construction of pumping-stations, supplying carrying-parties and also tunnelling.



(Preceding page: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – or by units such as the Pioneers – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

On April 9, 1917, the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

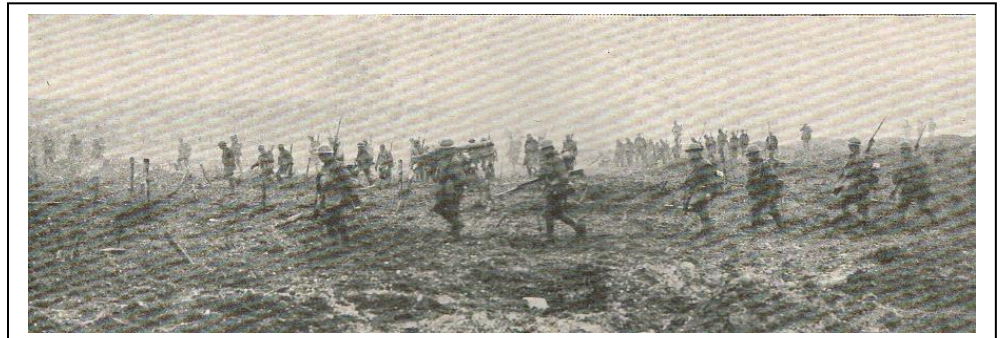


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive at *le Chemin des Dames* was yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

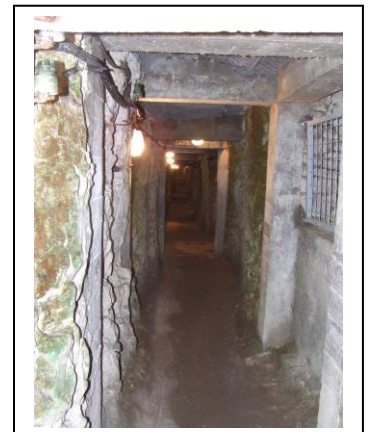
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – with many of the troops emerging from tunnels constructed for the purposes of both secrecy and security, into their assembly positions - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*. By the end of the next day the area had been cleared almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, equipped with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



Pioneer Cole's unit, of course, was not directly involved in the fighting of the day – which did not, however, preclude its personnel being shot at. The Pioneers were, nevertheless, still in the forefront of the action.

The 67th Pioneer Battalion War Diary entry for that April 9, 1917, reads partially as follows: *Officers 4 – Other ranks 111 - Throughout the night of 8/9-4-17 the main portion of this Party was engaged in carrying material for wiring, ammunition, stone(?) etc, from the... Dump to Montreal Crater... Our casualties were 4 killed, 16 Wounded.*



(Preceding page: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

(Right below: *In the immediate aftermath of the storming of Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps, wounded of both sides are being evacuated by means of a narrow-gauge railway which is still undergoing construction by Canadian Pioneer and Engineer personnel. – from Illustration*)

The son of John Cole, likely fisherman, and of Fanny Cole of Victoria Village, Newfoundland, he was also husband to Matilda (née *White*) and father to Sandy, Samuel, John-C., Isabella and Sarah, his wife and children also residing in Victoria.



John Charles Cole was also brother to Elias, to Sarah-Grace, and to Elijah-James.

Casualty report: *KIA* (Killed in Action) near Montreal Crater Vimy Ridge Buried on spot 9/4/17*

(Right: *The sacrifice of Pioneer Cole is commemorated on this stone memorial erected by his wife in the United Church graveyard in Victoria. The name engraved on the stone, curiously, is John E. Cole. – photograph from 2012*)

John Charles Cole had enlisted – at the *apparent* age according to his papers - of thirty-two years; then again, on his file and as documented by *Archives Canada*, his declared date of birth was September 24, 1893 - which would imply his enlistment at age twenty-two and his marriage (May 17, 1906) at age twelve*.



**A copy of the local parish records notes the date of his birth as May 8, 1884.*

(Right: *Almost exactly ninety-eight years to the day after the Canadian attack at Vimy Ridge, tourists, many of them also Canadian, stand on the lip of Montreal Crater* - to their left. – photograph from April, 2015*)



**The Crater is today an integral part of the visitors' pilgrimage at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial Park.*

Pioneer John Charles Cole was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – December 17, 2024.

