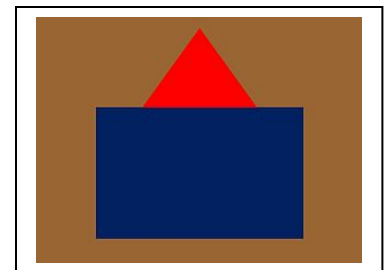




Private John Bannister, Number 877187, of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension No. 1*: grave reference VI.G.38.

**Four soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment are also interred there. As well, there is a number of German dead.*

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *school teacher*, John Bannister appears to have left behind him little or no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia*.



(Right above: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

**Although it is possible that he is the J. Bannister – soldier, on his way to the camp at Broughton – who travelled on the Kyle from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on May 25 of 1916 having been granted leave to visit his parents. This, however, is only speculation.*

His first pay records document that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Bannister for services rendered beginning on February 16 of 1916, the same paper also recording this as the date on which he – having presented himself in the industrial town of Sydney - was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

It was three weeks after this enlistment, on March 8 and later once again at Sydney, that Private Bannister underwent a first and second medical examination (see just below) which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force...*and also his attestation, the oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

It was not, however, to be until April 26th that this all became official: on that day Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, Commanding Officer of the 185th Battalion, declared (on paper) that...*877187 Pte. John Bannister...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Perhaps because of his having been a teacher, also perhaps because of a slight physical handicap – a broken leg as an infant had left him with one leg shorter than the other – he was posted to the Battalion’s staff personnel.

It is likely that those final formalities of April 26 took place at the almost-abandoned town of Broughton* on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. This was where the 185th Battalion was based and where it underwent at least some of its training; up to twelve hundred soldiers could be accommodated there at any one time. But in the month of May the unit was to be transferred to another camp.

**It had been built as a mining-town towards the end of the nineteenth century for the Cape Breton coal, Iron & Railway Company to exploit a coal seam in the area. Unfortunately for the investors, they were unable to transport the coal to port. They had also spent lavishly to create the town and, heavily in debt, had gone bankrupt in 1907.*

After April 26, Private Bannister’s posting to Broughton was to last a further four weeks. By that time, the authorities had decided to authorize the creation of a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at *Camp Aldershot* in Kings County, Nova Scotia, where the unit then would spend all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before departure for overseas service.

Having signed a paper on October 1 allotting a monthly twenty dollars from his pay to his father, Private Bannister embarked with the 185th Battalion – thirty-three officers, fifty-two sergeants and nine-hundred fifty-three *other ranks* - in the harbour at Halifax ten days later, on October 11.



(continued)

The vessel was His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister ship to *Britannic* – to be sunk by a mine in that November of 1916 while being employed in the Mediterranean as a hospital ship – and also to the ill-fated *Titanic*.

(Preceding page: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

One of the largest ships afloat at the time, *Olympic* was capable of carrying well over the six-thousand or so troops that she off-times did during and after the war. On this occasion, not only was it the 185th Battalion taking passage to the United Kingdom, but also the 85th, 188th, 193rd and 219th Battalions of Canadian Infantry, as well as a half-battalion of the 166th. Such were the logistics involved of having such a number of passengers that although Private Bannister embarked on October 11, he did not sail for a further two days.

Having weighed anchor late in the morning of October 13, 1916, *Olympic* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool late on the 18th. From there on the following day the 185th Battalion was transferred by train to *Camp Witley*, a Canadian military establishment on the border which separates the English counties of Surrey and Hampshire.

Private Bannister was to be stationed at *Witley Camp* for the subsequent fifteen months, until early 1918. The Battalion War Diary entry of February 13, 1918, then notes the following: *Orders received to furnish reinforcements of 100 men each to the following Units in France: 25th. Bn., 85th. Bn., R.C.R. The remainder of the Battalion to be absorbed by the 17th Reserve, Bramshott.*

Private Bannister was one of those scheduled to be attached to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) thus training for him, and for the other draftees soon to be on their way to the Continent, began to proceed apace at *Witley*.

The final entry of the 185th Battalion War Diary before its dissolution was type-written on February 23 of 1918. Upon that date the remaining personnel was to be absorbed into the 17th Canadian Reserve Battalion at nearby *Bramshott Camp* – although apparently this procedure had already transpired *on paper* as early as February 15*.

The 185th Battalion's organizers had originally anticipated that the *Cape Breton Highlanders* would be despatched from England, as an entity with the other three units of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade*, into *active service* on the Continent, but this was not to be*. Only the 85th Battalion would eventually proceed – in early 1917 - to serve in the trenches of the *Western Front*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

(continued)

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been specifically designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

It was to be yet another six days after the official end of the 185th Battalion before Private Bannister set foot in France, having in the meantime been temporarily retained at *Witley*; on that day, March 1 of 1918, he was transferred – on paper - to the 25th Battalion, already serving in France.

There seems to be no reference in his file to either the ports from and to which he sailed on the night of March 1-2, or the name of the vessel, but the War Diary of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étapes notes the arrival of three-hundred thirteen reinforcements from England at Étapes and at the Canadian Base Depot there on that same date.



(Right above: *A view of the French port-city of Le Havre – where Private Bannister likely disembarked - at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right below: *Re-enforcements for an unidentified Canadian-Scottish unit, preceded by its pipe-band, on the march at this time somewhere on the Continent – from Le Miroir*)



The same Diary also notes the departure of five-hundred ninety-nine personnel from there to various units two days afterwards, on March 3, the date on which Private Bannister is recorded in his own dossier as having left the Base Depot to join the 25th Battalion.

It is more than likely that the following eleven days were then spent at the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp at Calonne Ricouart some ninety kilometres to the east of Étapes, as Private Bannister is not recorded as having reported *to duty in the field* until March 14, 1918, when a draft of one-hundred eight *other ranks* was to arrive at Raimbert where the 25th Battalion was serving at the time.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some thirty months by the time of Private Bannister’s arrival, since mid-September of the year, 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front*.



(Preceding page: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could indicate any unit in British uniform – including from the Empire (Commonwealth). This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)



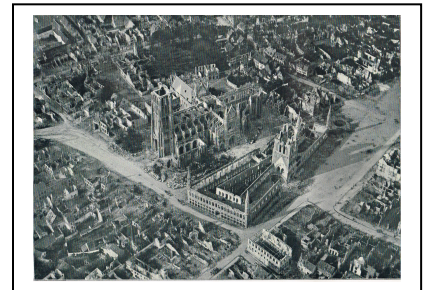
(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century after the Great War as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)

Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25th Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2nd Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. These were in the area forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel, in that small part of the country which had not by then been occupied by the Germans, and to the south of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



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

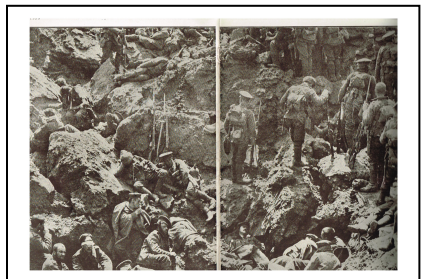
(Right: *A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres as early as 1915 – the city is described as 'morte' (dead) – from Illustration*)



The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It had been at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines beneath the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, had greeted the newcomers who were to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

(continued)

Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25th Battalion had relieved another Canadian unit in craters and new trenches, and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had incurred on any single occasion up until that date.

The next large-scale infantry confrontation to be contested between the Canadian forces and the German Army came about in the south-eastern area of the *Ypres Salient* where the 3rd Canadian Division had recently been posted. The situation, however, had rapidly deteriorated to become serious enough so that units other than those of the 3rd Division were soon ordered into the fray.



On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under Canadian (and thus British) control. This had been just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.

(Right above: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to re-organize their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly coordinated, was to prove a costly experience for the Canadians.



(Right above: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914*)

(Right: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)



The infantry confrontation had continued until June 13, the final action having been a well-supported attack in the first hours of that morning. The Germans had retreated and by the end of the affair, both sides – apart from a small German gain at *Hooge* – were back much where they had started: it was *status quo* but that the cemeteries were more numerous and that much more full.



(continued)

(Preceding page: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. In the first week of June, 1917, a British mine detonated under its summit was to remove much of any similarity to a hill. – photograph from 2014)

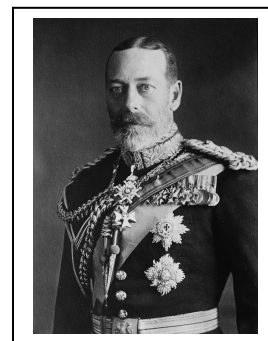


(Right above: Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014)

It had been the Canadian 3rd Division which was to be the main recipient of the enemy's full offensive thrust, but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division had apparently to played a role sufficiently important to warrant the name *Mount Sorrel* becoming the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.

From the middle of June up until August of 1916, 20, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.

(Right: George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – photograph from Bain News Services via Wikipedia)



Some two weeks later, on the 27th, the unit had been withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moulle.

The following week at Moulle would be spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross Rifle*, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.

(Right above: Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph on a following page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)



***The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it would jam, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.**

(continued)

By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

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



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

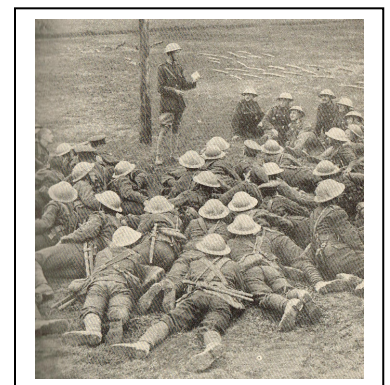
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland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



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

(Right above: *Canadian soldiers working, carrying water in the centre of Albert, the town's already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.



On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

(Right above: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)

(Right above)

Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916: *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcelette... the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

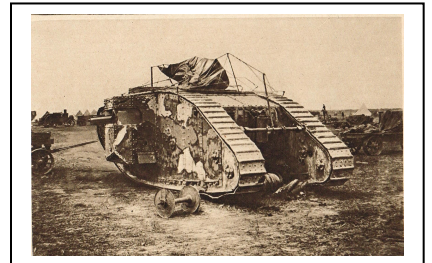
(Right: *Seen from the north, the village of Courcelette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)



Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who had gone over *the top* on the day of the assault, the 25th Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.

**It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

(Right: *One of the tanks employed during the First Battle of the Somme, here withdrawn from the field and standing in one of the parks where these machines were overhauled and maintained – from Le Miroir*)



**Some of the first tanks ever to be used in battle had apparently been a positive element during the fighting of the day on the Canadians' Front.*

On October 1 the 25th Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture "at all costs" enemy trenched known as KENORA and REGINA... "B", "C" and "D" Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*

(Right: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The attack was to be a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right below: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)



(continued)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and had made its way westwards and then northwards. It was to subsequently pass to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. There the unit would remain for the following six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay.

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)



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



That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25th Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare*; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a welcome respite.

There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides.

The medical facilities during this period were to be kept much more busy by cases of sickness and dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.

(Right: *A detachment of Canadian troops moving up to forward positions during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)



**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



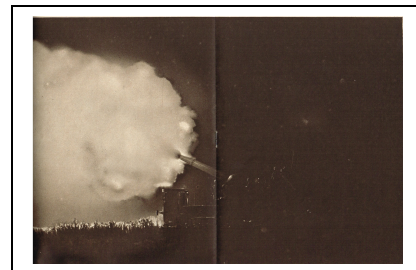
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: *A photograph of Canadian troops in their support positions somewhere on the Somme during the autumn of the year 1916 - By that time they had been equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration*)

Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the 25th Battalion had been ordered withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, where it was to undergo intensive training which was to be the eventual lot of most, if not all, of the battalions of the Canadian Corps before the upcoming British offensive: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts...and at *Vimy Ridge*, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the presence of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.

During the final five days, April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked: then, in only two days' time, all that training was now to become the real thing.

As the days had passed the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion was to describe it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans would have become aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had begun throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been extremely busy*.



(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration*)

**It ought to be noted that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*

On April 8...*Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route...* (Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary). But it apparently was not to pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

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

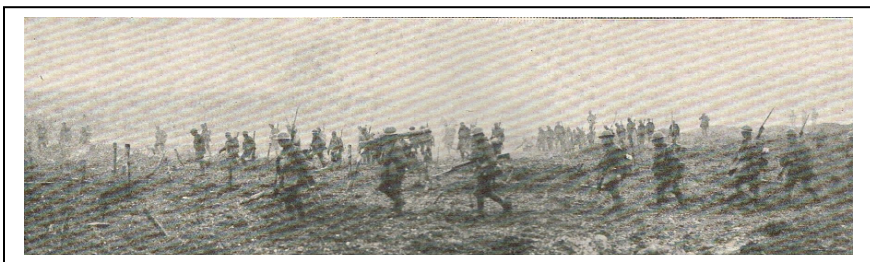


The British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, but the French *Bataille du Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Preceding page: *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, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)

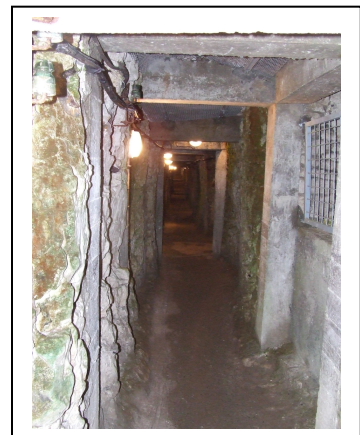


The 2nd Canadian Division – with the aforementioned British brigade under its command - had not been responsible for the taking of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack.

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

The Battalion's objectives had apparently soon been captured and much of the remainder of the day had been spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

(Right below: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge, anonymous dead lying in the foreground: The fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)



The Germans, having lost *Vimy Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, had retreated some three kilometres into prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks were also to reclaim ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle in early May.



(Right pare following: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)

(continued)

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, but highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – however, such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift movement of guns and material – and in any case, the orders had been...*to consolidate*.



Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* to be fought in the manner of the first two days and, by the end of those five weeks, little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success. By the time that the *Battle of Arras* had officially drawn to its conclusion in mid-May, the 25th Battalion had been withdrawn into reserve, to rest and to train – if that is not a contradiction – in the vicinity of the community of Gouy-Servins, to the west of the city of Lens.

Now there were to be several weeks before a return to the forward area. Excerpts from 25th Battalion War diaries of July 2 and 3, 1917: *Battalion at BOUVIGNY HUTS. Preparations to relieve 46th British Division, 138th. and 137th. British Brigades, 1/5 Battalion Leicesters and 1/4 Battalion Leicesters. Casualties, 1 Other Rank killed, 9 Other Ranks wounded. Relief completed about 2 a.m. – No further casualties were to be documented for the remainder of the day.*

Thus it was back to business as usual.

The British High Command by that time had, long before, decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from this area, it had ordered other operations as well to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort and one of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

On this occasion it was to be the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions which were to assume the responsibility for the capture of the aforementioned *Hill 70*. Thus during the second week of August the 25th Battalion had been moving forward to the northern outskirts of the city and mining-centre of Lens in preparation for the attack on - and capture of - what is a seemingly-innocuous piece of territory.

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)



Yet *Hill 70* had been high enough to have been considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – as the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)



Objectives had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences had held firm and the Canadian artillery, by then employing newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* had remained in Canadian hands.



(Right: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)

Of course, the Germans had not been the only ones to have incurred casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion was to retire on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*, fifty of which were apparently incurred on that August 17.



(Right: *The spoils of war: Canadian officers and men on some of the terrain on which they had recently fought – and captured – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)

While it may have retired temporarily from front-line positions on August 17, the respite was to last not even a day – and the unit had incurred casualties even while withdrawing into those support positions. On August 18 the Battalion War Diarist was to report a unit *trench strength* of just fifteen officers and three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks*.

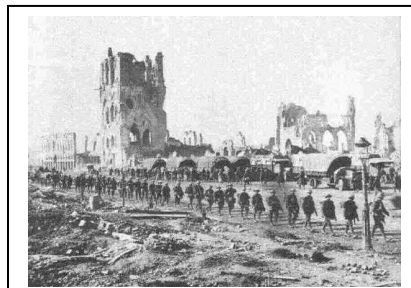
On the night of August 20-21, the 25th Battalion had relieved the 22nd Battalion in the front line, still in the area of the Cité St-Laurent*. Relieved on the night of August 21-22, the depleted ranks of the unit had retired on foot and by bus to the afore-mentioned community of Gouy-Servins. To the casualty count of August 17, a further seventy could now be added.

**The many pit-heads and their neighbourhoods surrounding the mining-centre and city of Lens were often designated by the term Cité followed by the name of a saint.*

After the weeks of relatively little infantry activity during the early days of that summer of 1917, the attack on August 15 in the area of *Hill 70* and the city of Lens had apparently been intended as the precursor to further weeks of an entire campaign to be spear-headed by the Canadian Corps.

However, the British offensive of that summer, further to the north, in Belgium, had been proceeding less well than had been presumed and the Canadians, the Australians and the New Zealanders were to be needed there. Offensive activities in the *Lens Sector* had been suspended in early September and thus for a short period the 25th Canadian Infantry Battalion was to revert to those rigours and routines, the everyday grind, of existence in – and out of - the trenches.

It was not to be until the final weeks of the month of October that the Canadians were to become embroiled in the British summer – and then autumn - offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having taken that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – *ostensibly* - one of the British High Command's objectives.



(Right above: *Troops file past the vestiges of the venerable Cloth Hall and through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

(Right: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)



From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3, the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the by-then non-existent Passchendaele village itself.

The strength of the 25th Battalion on that November 5 was to be reported as twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-six other ranks, perhaps some sixty per cent of establishment unit numbers.

(Right: *The Canadian Memorial standing on Passchendaele Ridge, at the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village – photograph from 2015*)



During the three days that the unit would spend at the front at this time, the casualties sustained by the 25th Battalion were, by comparison to those incurred by other units, fairly light: seventeen *killed in action*, sixty-seven *wounded* and six *missing in action*.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)



During the late evening of November 8 the 25th Battalion was ordered withdrawn from the area of the front line and eventually moved to the west of Ypres itself, to the area of the village of Vlamertinghe. On November 13 it retired back across the frontier into France and south to the area of Neuville St-Vaast, adjacent to *Vimy Ridge*.

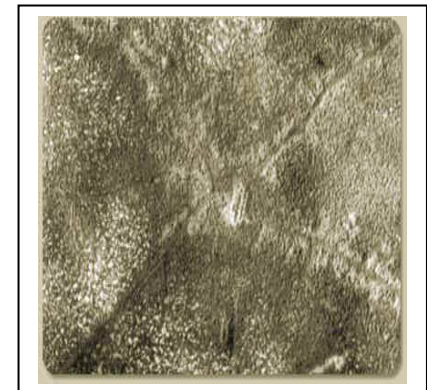
(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

The 25th Battalion was to remain in this area until, a month later again, on or about December 6, it was ordered back to the area of Villers-au-Bois, not many kilometres distant from where it had just been serving, and from where it would now move up into *support* and the *front-line* – and back again during the next three weeks of the month.

Although the 25th Battalion War Diarist appears to have neglected it in his entries of the time, the month of December, 1917, held a special interest for the Canadian Forces serving overseas: the Canadian National Election.



From the first day of the month until the seventeenth(?), Canadian militia personnel were to vote. While the Battalion's journal does not, other war diaries *do* record the event and in most cases the number of participants reached and at times surpassed ninety per cent. At the same time the soldiery was encouraged to purchase *Government War Bonds* which allowed the troops to not only *fight* in the conflict but to also help to *pay* for it as well.

The 25th Battalion was not to spend Christmas of 1917 in the trenches as it had done the previous year, but in the rear area at Enquin-les-Mines. Church services were arranged for at least two of the Christian denominations – Roman Catholic and Church of England - and...*all ranks enjoyed a special Christmas dinner in the afternoon.* What was on the menu, however, we have not been given to know.

The winter of 1917-1918 was now to be spent in the same area. As had been the case during the previous winters of the Great War little concerted confrontational military activity for that period was to be reported in the 25th Battalion War Diary – or in any other battalion war diary. There was the habitual patrolling, by both sides, and in the case of this Nova Scotian unit several raids were planned, all except one of which were cancelled or postponed indefinitely because the artillery had been unable to cut the wire.

The 25th Battalion was to remain at Enquin-les-Mines until mid-January when it moved in stages to the sector forward of Villers-au-Bois. Once again the routine became one of *front, support* and *reserve*, although on March 18, during a posting to Raimbert, for some of the personnel there was to be a welcome break – one presumes it to have been so - from it all: a fourteen-day period of leave to the United Kingdom.

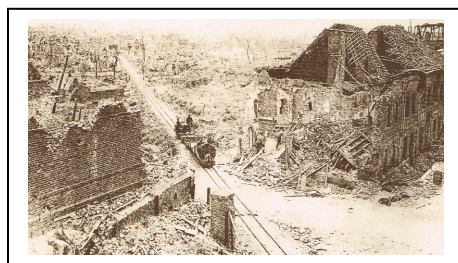


(Right above: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

It had been, of course, only four days prior to this exodus back across the English Channel that Private Bannister and the other one-hundred seven *other ranks* from the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp had arrived to report to *duty* with their new unit, the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotian Rifles*).

* * * * *

On March 23, almost three weeks later and two days following the first day of spring - the unit moved from Raimbert further south, on this occasion to the area of St-Aubin on the outskirts of Arras, to arrive there on the 24th.



The Battalion was then '*standing-by*', ready to move on short notice, owing to expectations of an attack by the enemy.

(Right above: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources say that this is neighbouring Liévin - in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the war, the enemy launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

The main blow was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it was to descend for the most part on the British Fifth Army stationed there, particularly where its forces were serving adjacent to French units.

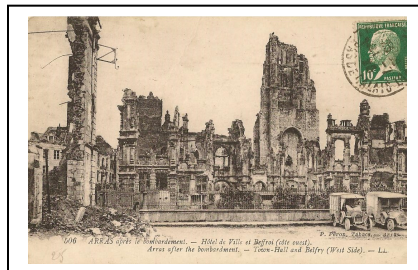
The German advance continued for some two weeks, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and a great deal of French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

**A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was to be successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



Its War Diary suggests, however, that the 25th Battalion was not involved in the heaviest – if any - of the related fighting. The unit was posted mostly near Wailly*, just to the south-west of the city of Arras, the majority of the casualties incurred were due – as they often were - to enemy artillery activity rather than to infantry action.



**The area just to the south and west of Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive. Unsure as to what the enemy's intentions were, the High Command moved the 2nd Canadian Division into the area to forestall any attack if and when it occurred to protect the avenue to the Channel ports and also the coal-fields in the area of Béthune.*

In the event, the offensive in that direction was stopped cold by the British Third Army before it reached Arras, but during the period of the crisis the Germans had stayed active enough to keep the British and Canadians wondering.

As for the situation to the north, it apparently was never deemed serious enough to warrant any Canadian movement in that direction.

(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

On March 29, the unit had just completed an all-night march from Raimbert via Houdain and St-Aubin to Wailly where it was once more placed in the forward lines in anticipation of yet another attack which was never to materialize. The Battalion War Diary reports that the day was wet and cold and that the troops had not had a meal for twenty-four hours.

On the following day, March 30, the same source reports artillery activity, the weather still wet and cold, and still no enemy attack. The Diarist has also entered: *Casualties – 1 O.R. accidentally wounded.*

(continued)

The documents appear to offer no further details other than that... *No 715966 Private J Carter* to blame.* Presumably it was his weapon that discharged, inflicting gun-shot wounds to Private Bannister's legs – apparently it was the left leg which suffered the greater injury.

**Private John Carter was a fellow Newfoundlander from Cape Ray and had been serving at the front since the end of 1916, during which period, on March 6, he had been awarded a Good Conduct Badge. Wounded in August of 1918, he eventually recovered fully and returned to Canada. There is no mention at all in his personal dossier about the incident involving Private Bannister.*

Private Bannister is reported as having been evacuated to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance. This unit, however, was in the throes of moving to Berles-au-Bois on that date so he may well have been afforded only a minimum of temporary treatment there before being forwarded – still on March 30 - to the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital at Doullens.



(Right above: *A view of the provincial town of Doullens at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The son of Heber Ernest George Bannister, fisherman - to whom he had willed his all - and of Mary Ann Bannister (née *Bailey*) of Port Rexton, he was also brother to Gilbert, to Elizabeth-Bailey, Victoria-Annie, Isadora, to Julia and to Salome.

Private Bannister was reported as having *died of wounds (accidental)* on that same March 30, at the same 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital.

John Bannister had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-four years and three months: date of birth in Port Rexton, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, December 6, 1891 (from attestation papers); the original Newfoundland Birth Register cites November 6, 1891 at Ship Cove although a second Register, partly incomplete, appears to have the year as 1892.

Private John Bannister 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 – January 23, 2023.

