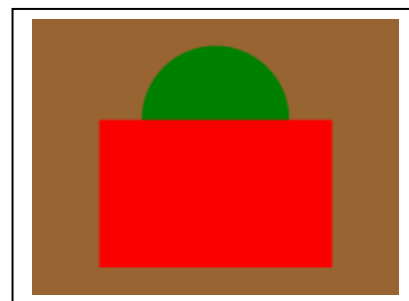


Private William Barrett (Number A/10766) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*East Ontario Regiment*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 10-18-26-28.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, William Barrett may have been the young man of twenty-one years of age who crossed from Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, to North Sydney, Nova Scotia on board the SS *Bruce* on May 28, 1910\*.

*\*This information requires confirmation.*

(Right above: *The image of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion shoulder-flash is from Wikipedia.*)



Two papers among his files have William Barrett as enlisting – at the daily rate of \$1.10 and *for the duration of the war* - in the community of Smith's Falls – astride the Rideau Canal in Ontario – on February 13 of 1915, at which time he was forthwith attached to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment for a brief period.

Subsequent documentation is of a medical examination undergone in Ottawa on March 27 and then his attestation on the following day, March 28. On the former of these two dates, Private Barrett was attached to the 38<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Ottawa*), Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The 38<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Draft) embarked for overseas service in the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia, onto His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie* on June 24 of 1915. The vessel sailed on that same day, the 24<sup>th</sup>, and ten days later docked in the English south-coast port of Plymouth.



Private Barrett and his draft had not sailed alone on *Missanabie*; also taking passage on board ship had been at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> Draft of the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry, and a draft of the Canadian Army Dental Corps.

(Right above: *The photograph of Canadian Pacific Steamship Company's SS Missanabie is from the Old Ship Pictures Galleries Web-Site.*)

It is likely that Private Barrett's contingent travelled immediately on that July 4 to the Canadian establishment at Shorncliffe near the English-Channel town of Folkestone in the county of Kent. This seems more than probable since he is reported as having been placed *on strength* of the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion there on that day.



(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

Some seven weeks later again, on August 24, Private Barrett was on his way to the Continent, likely departing through Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne, two hours sailing-time away on the opposite coast. He was placed on the nominal roll of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the next day.



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

His records show that Private Barrett joined the parent unit of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*East Ontario Regiment*) *in the field* on August 28, 1915.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Eastern Ontario*), a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – itself an element of the Canadian Division - had sailed from Canada in October of 1914 on the convoy which was to bring the troops of the Canadian Division\* across the Atlantic\*\*.

*\*The Canadian Division was designated thus until the formation of the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division when, logically, it became the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division.*

***\*\*Joined off the south coast of Newfoundland by the SS Florizel which had embarked the First Five Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment.***

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had, by the time of Private Barretts's arrival, been serving on the Continent for some six months. After a stormy passage from England, it had disembarked in the French port of St-Nazaire on February 11 of 1915 with the other units of the Canadian Division.

The Battalion had then at first been posted to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier only days after its arrival in France, entering the trenches for the first time near the northern French town of Armentières. It had then served in the Fleurbaix Sector just to the south of the border before having been posted to the *Ypres Salient* - it was on April 18, at twenty-five minutes past ten in the morning, that the unit – in fact, the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade - was to cross the border into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

The Brigade crossed the frontier to the west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe where it was then to remain for two days before advancing eastwards to Vlamertinghe for a further two. It was at that moment that the Germans had decided to launch their attack in an effort to take the nearby city of Ypres.

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



(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely to be in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)



Other units of the Canadian Division had only been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for a short space of time. During these few days of Canadian tenure *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet. Then the dam broke - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it. The date was April 22, 1915.



(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> *Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. It was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.

(Right: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The cloud was noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, became necessary while, at the same time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade were moved forward to support the efforts of the French and of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade.

(Right below: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

By the second day, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement became necessary. At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion remained attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade to the north-east of *the Salient* until April 25 when it withdrew towards Vlamertinghe and re-joined its parent 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade. Remaining there to rest on the following day, the unit was ordered forward to occupy positions near a (the?) pontoon bridge on the Yser Canal. Heavily shelled on the morrow, the Battalion returned to its billets at Vlamertinghe on the 29<sup>th</sup>.



There it was to remain until May 3 when it was withdrawn further, to the northern French centre of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and re-organize.

(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right above: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion retired to its western bank – to the left – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)



On May 15 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was ordered to move down the line via Colonne and Hinges to Béthune from where it was to advance three days afterwards towards the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert, a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not possessing the same numbers of troops – would not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered heavily.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7<sup>th</sup> (*Meerut*) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert - had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.



*\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right above: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

On the final day of May the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had been relieved from its posting at Festubert and on June 1 was in billets in Essars; in nine days' time it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*, a small village not far distant down the line from Festubert. Despatched into the forward trenches from June 11 to 17 to support British efforts, the unit incurred the same sort of results – fourteen *killed*, seventy-nine *wounded* - from repeating the same kind of mistakes as at Festubert. On June 17 the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion among the first to do so.

*\*Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to march to billets in or near to the community of Oblinghem, two kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune. From there on June 25, it began to move towards and into Belgium, to the Ploegsteert Sector, just across the frontier.

(continued)

On the 28<sup>th</sup>, the day of Private Barrett's reported – only by his own files - arrival to the unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Eastern Ontario*) was back in the trenches.

\* \* \* \* \*

Having reached the Ploegsteert area, there the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion would remain – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

The Canadian Division – re-designated, logically, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division with the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division - was to remain in that border area of West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.

During those months there was only a single occasion on which a concerted attempt was made by either side to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches, and it did not involve the troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.

The *Battle of St. Eloi Craters* – the action to involve troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division - officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St. Eloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines. These tunnels were then filled with explosives which were detonated on that March 27.



After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They had no more success than their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17<sup>th</sup>, when the battle was called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had taken some fifteen-hundred casualties.

(Right above: *Advancing in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine – from Illustration*)

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion during this period was to be aware of a greater German artillery activity, but its War Diary reports no increase in infantry action, only the everyday rigours and routines of life in the trenches\*. Casualties were caused, as usual, for the most part by enemy artillery fire\*\* and his snipers.

(continued)

***\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less 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 position at times for weeks on end.***

***(Right: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)***



***\*\*It is estimated that some sixty percent of the casualties of the Great War were due to artillery-fire.***

**The only apparent respite enjoyed by Private Barrett during that winter and spring, according to his documentation, was a period spent on leave from April 30 until May 7. Not returning to his unit until May 14, he may in this instance have spent time in transit at the Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Le Havre – but where exactly he spent that week of leave appears not to have been recorded.**



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

**On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the Ypres Salient which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Maple Copse 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)***

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



***\*It was an area of the Ypres Salient which had recently become the responsibility of the newly-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division that the Germans attacked. However, the situation soon became serious enough for other Canadian units to become involved.***



The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly coordinated, proved a costly disaster for the Canadians.



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

The Battalion War Diary entry for June 3, 1916, reads as follows: *Received orders at 3 AM and moved to Dickebusch Huts. In evening moved up to trenches and relieved the 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> Battalions in front line. Practically no trenches. Each man had dug himself in. Heavily shelled coming through Zillebeke.*



(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014*)

The son of James John Barrett, fisherman, and of Eliza Barrett (née *Badcock*) of French's Cove, Bay Roberts, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least John (Number 406, Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps), apparently to a further unidentified brother who also served overseas, and to Herbert who died of illness in 1915.

(Right: *This family memorial which commemorates Private Barrett stands in the Bay Roberts Old Cemetery. – with thanks for his kind contribution to Gary Badcock of Branch 32 of the Royal Canadian Legion*)



Private Barrett was at first reported as *missing in action since operations of 3/6/16 to 8/6/16* – these operations having been in support of the battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division in forward positions in the area of *Hill 60* in the *Ypres Salient*.

On February 9 of 1917 his record was amended – the reason not cited - so as to read *killed in action 3/6/16*.

William Barrett had enlisted at the age of twenty-five years: date of birth, October 2, 1889.

(Right: *The sacrifice of Private William Barrett is honoured on the War Memorial in Bay Roberts – photograph from 2010(?)*)



(continued)



Private William Barrett was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 19, 2023.