



Private Alexander Bearns (Number 478506) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Wailly Orchard Cemetery: grave reference III.G.4.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner - the 1904 St. John's, Newfoundland, Business Directory also records him as being a clerk at *I.F. Perlin* of Water Street – there appears to be no clear documentation as to when Alexander Bearns left Newfoundland to take up work at Glace Bay in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.



(Previous page: *The image of the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

His papers show him having undergone a medical examination and attestation in Sydney, Cape Breton, on September 17 of 1915, but an early payroll record* shows that Alexander Bearns was first remunerated for his services by the Canadian Army on September 9, suggesting, of course, that *this* was the date of his enlistment.

Private Bearns' immediate attachment to the Royal Canadian Regiment was approved on September 21 when the officer commanding the Regimental Depot of the Royal Canadian Regiment brought the formalities of his enlistment to a conclusion – thus likely in Halifax - when he declared – on paper – that...*Alex Bearns...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

There in Halifax, for no apparent reason, Private Bearns was medically examined once more, on the 23rd.

** The same paper also documents him as being attached, at least temporarily, to the Sydney Depot Company at this time.*

There must now have been some logistical and bureaucratic complications in delivering Private Bearns to the United Kingdom. By the time of his enlistment, the parent company had, in the month of August, already traversed the Atlantic on board His Majesty's Transport *Caledonia*. There were apparently three re-enforcements drafts to follow, but not one of them was to sail from Canada until the following year, 1916*.

**One paper shows him to be a soldier of the 2nd Draft, impossible as this was a contingent which is not recorded as departing Canada until October of 1916.*

Yet before the end of 1915, Private Bearns was already in England; on November 25, he was attached to the 11th Reserve Battalion at the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, located in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone on the Dover Straits in the county of Kent.

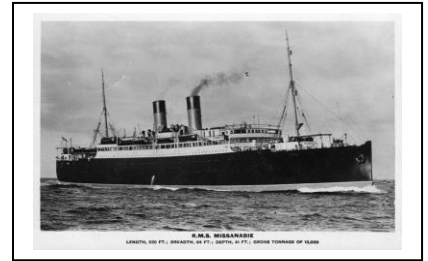
Logically, he must have sailed in mid-November to be at *Shorncliffe* by the 25th – but not too early: there are no records of him wandering around England at this time. And his pay records with the Royal Canadian Regiment have been documented up until October 15.

(Right top: *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*)



(continued)

One of the few possible answers is that Private Bearns left Halifax for Montreal and sailed on November 13 from there on board HMT Missanabie in the company of – or temporarily attached to – some other unit. However he is not on listed on the nominal rolls of the three main contingents on board Missanabie – although at times miscellaneous small detachments also travelled.



Missanabie arrived in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth on November 22, 1915.

(Right above: The photograph of His Majesty’s Transport Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

Private Bearn’s trans-Atlantic passage remains a mystery.

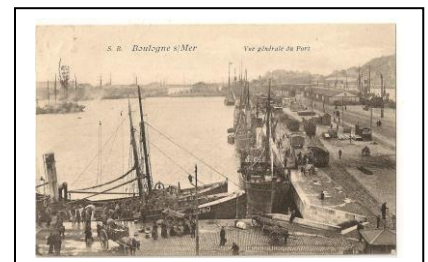
The two last days of February, 1916, the 28th and 29th – it was a leap year - were spent by Private Bearns in the Military Hospital at *Shorncliffe*. On March 1 he was forwarded to *Cherryhinton* Military Hospital in the university city of Cambridge, there to receive fifty-seven days of medical attention for a venereal problem that it was suggested he had contracted back home in Sydney.

Upon his release from hospital on April 27 he was discharged to the combined Depot of the Royal Canadian Regiment and the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, a camp which had been established at East Sandling, also in the vicinity of Folkestone and a part of the *Shorncliffe* complex. There Private Bearns returned upon his arrival, to the 11th Reserve Battalion, a unit with which he was to serve for a further two months, until April 27.



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

It was on or about June 6 of the same 1916 that Private Bearns was ordered to France for a first occasion, being reported as once more *on strength* of the Royal Canadian Regiment on that date. He likely disembarked in the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite *Shorncliffe* and then reported to the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

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



However, there is no record of the time spent at the Canadian Base Depot upon arrival in France, or of the date on which he reported *to duty* to his unit *in the field**.

**On each of June 9, 10, and 11 a re-enforcement draft arrived. Totalling two-hundred eighty other ranks, they more than made up for the one-hundred thirty-nine casualties incurred in the fighting of the days prior (see below).*

Eleven days after his arrival in France, on June 17, Private Bearns was to write a will in which it he left everything to a Mrs. Eliza Matheson of Glace Bay whom he reported to be his landlady*, but to be *no relation*. Perhaps somewhat curiously, on the same paper he also wrote the following: *In case of death Inform Mrs Alice Bearns 40 Water Street West St Johns Newfoundland.*

**He also named her as his next-of-kin on his enlistment papers with the same disclaimer.*

* * * * *

The Royal Canadian Regiment, although being the senior Regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of *the Great War*, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas. In fact, it had initially been sent for a year to act as garrison of the British possession of Bermuda.

After it had been returned home in the summer of 1915 on HMT *Caledonia* and then ordered overseas only days later, in that August on the same *Caledonia*, it had been attached to the 7th Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Canadian Division. The RCR had then been transferred to the Continent on November 1 of 1915, and immediately sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area, thence to the southern area of Belgium to train with the by-then veteran Canadian 1st Division. Then towards the end of March, 1916, it had been ordered into the *Ypres Salient*. In those places, during the winter and spring months of 1916 the unit had settled into the routines of trench warfare*.

**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, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*



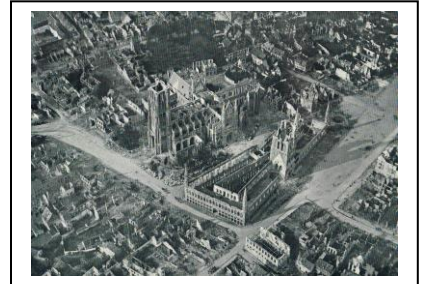
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

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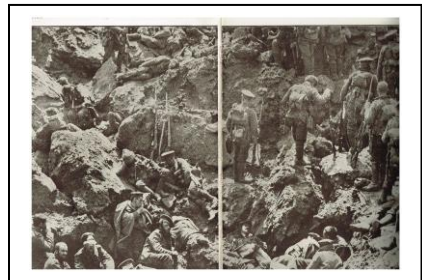
While there was little, if any, concerted infantry action on that part of the front which had become the responsibility of the Canadian 3rd Division, the routines of the day kept the units busy. At the forward area there was construction, consolidation and improvement of trenches and defensive positions, and the wiring of *them* and of No-Man's-Land. There was sentry duty and patrolling, interspersed now and again by a raid – an activity practised by both sides. There was also that steady trickle of casualties, caused for the most part by enemy artillery action and by his snipers.

In April there was a more serious confrontation further down the front towards the border. It involved at first the British and then the Canadian 2nd Division – and of course, the German Army. The RCR, nearer to Ypres was to only hear the rumble of the guns.



(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows 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 to be little left standing. – from Illustration*)

That *Battle of the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi 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, filling them with explosives. These mines they detonated on that March 27, the infantry following up with an assault.



After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th, 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*)

But it was to be a further six weeks before the Canadian 3rd Division and the Royal Canadian Regiment were to experience their *own* baptism of fire.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



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

(Right below: *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*)

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.

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

The Royal Canadian Regiment had been serving in the front line in the area of the first attack and had been driven back with heavy casualties. The Germans made repeated attacks on that day, interspersed with heavy artillery bombardments. The morning of the next day saw a further attempt by the Germans to advance against the positions of the neighbouring Battalion, the PPCLI, in which they succeeded. Then began those disorganized and subsequently futile Canadian counter-attacks.



By comparison with the first two days of the encounter, June 4 and 5 were relatively quiet. On the evening of the latter day the RCR was relieved and arrived at 'B' Camp at five in the morning. The unit was to take no further part in the action. It had suffered the afore-mentioned one-hundred forty-five casualties among the *other ranks* – plus fourteen *missing*, all of whom eventually returned to duty – plus six officers.



(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*)

On June 7 the Battalion retired even further to the west, to Steenvoorde, across the border and into France. This is when and where Private Bearn reported *to duty*.

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It was to be a further fourteen days before the unit and the newly arrived Private Bearn were ordered forward, moving towards the front in busses to Ypres from where the RCR Battalion was guided by the Irish Guards into the trenches which were now a Canadian responsibility.



(Above right: *London busses, requisitioned for the war, transporting troops in Belgium, some apparently preferring to walk – from Illustration*)

Life in the *Ypres Salient* was now to follow much the same pattern as before the confrontation at Mount Sorrel and in general the summer of 1916 was relatively quiet in Belgium – although less so during the third week of August when several raids and some aggressive patrolling by both sides was undertaken. Then, as of August 19, Private Shave's Battalion was withdrawn to the rear area before being ordered to Cassel on August 24 where it remained until September 6.

Private Bearn by that time, however, was in hospital.

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Some ten weeks after his arrival in France, on August 15, 1916, Private Bearn was back in hospital, this time having been admitted into the 35th General Hospital in Calais. He received treatment there for two days – the complaint on this occasion being *jaundice* – before being placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Newhaven*, for the return passage to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *The photograph of a pre-War SS Newhaven is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

The vessel docked in Folkestone later on that same August 17, whereupon Private Bearn was passed through the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre* and despatched at once to the 1st Eastern General Hospital at Cambridge, being admitted into that institution for medical attention on the 18th.

**It is unlikely that he physically made an appearance at the CCAC as in theory this was only a bureaucratic unit designed to organize the whereabouts of injured and ill Canadian soldiers in the United Kingdom. It was apparently not very efficient and ceased to exist after about a year.*

Fifty-eight days later, on October 14, Private Bearn was released from hospital at Cambridge. It would appear from the remarks on his medical records of the time that he was then to travel back to the Regimental Depot at Shorncliffe. However, his posting there was to last only sixteen days before he was then admitted into to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital, Woodcote Park, Epsom*.

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The records indicate that he had had a relapse and it would be a further four weeks before the jaundice was finally beaten. On that November 28, Private Bearn was discharged from Epsom to – once more at least on paper through the CCAC office at Hastings - before being sent to the nearby Canadian Command Depot. He was there until February 13 of 1917, eleven weeks in all, before being placed *on strength* of the 26th (Reserve) Battalion with which unit he apparently served for the following eight months.

The only mention in the files of Private Bearn during this period is that at the Depot he underwent a Lewis-Gun course which began on May 17.

He was subsequently ordered to *active service overseas* – to the Continent – for a second time on November 10 of 1917, having been transferred for the purpose of transfer from the 26th Battalion to the 17th (Reserve) Battalion at the large Canadian military establishment at Bramshott on October 15.



(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott.* – photograph from 2016)

Landing in France on November 11 Private Bearn thereupon spent time at the 3rd Canadian Infantry Base Depot, further up the coast from Le Havre – where he likely had disembarked from England – and in the vicinity of the town of Étapes.

Private Bearn is recorded as once again having joined the Royal Canadian Regiment in the field on November 24. He was one of a draft of fifty-eight *other ranks* noted in the Battalion War Diary entry of that day as having reported *to duty* from Base Depot in the northern French community of Rely, at some distance behind the lines. There were apparently to be found there... *Excellent training facilities... What was more... We look forward to a pleasant and comfortable month's rest...* the source of this information being an optimistic War Diarist.

At the time, the parent unit had been in Rely for only three days. The Battalion had just been withdrawn from the Ypres Sector, Belgium, where it had served during the *Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele*, having incurred some four-hundred casualties during the posting there.



(Right: *Somewhere – it might have been anywhere – on the Passchendaele battle-field* – from *Illustration*)

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During Private Bearn's absence, the Royal Canadian Regiment* had not been inactive. A constant presence on the *Western Front* during the period of Private Bearn's absence, it had also played a role in three major operations: *First Somme*, the *First Battle of Arras* and *Third Ypres*.

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*** A regiment was a military formation which could comprise any number of battalions. In peace-time the count was usually fewer than in war-time: for example, prior to the Great War, the Essex Regiment numbered as many as eight battalions; during the conflict the Regiment was to provide thirty infantry battalions. The two Canadian regiments to fight in the War, the RCR and the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) each had a single fighting battalion, often referred to by the regimental title.**

Only days after Private Bearn's departure for medical attention, and having been moved to the area of Cassell, his Battalion was to be busy for the next two weeks.

That period was for the most part spent in training; when it rained too heavily, lectures; and of course the inevitable parades and inspections: practising attacks in platoon, company and battalion strength; co-operation with aircraft; musketry; and bombing to which were added a number of route marches were the lot of the RCR Battalion.

On September 7 Private Shave and his Battalion paraded at four in the morning, then marched to the railway station at Esquelbecq for an eleven-hour train-ride southwards, to Conteville before a further march to billets in Cramont. This community was well to the west of the fighting at the time and the unit trained there for two days before marching again – toward the sound of the guns.

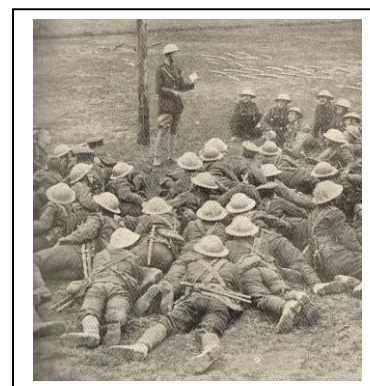
By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – all in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.

On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the 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 at Beaumont-Hamel.



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – 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. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



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

The RCR had arrived in the area of the provincial town of Albert in the late evening of September 13 and on the 15th was ordered to move forward in order to attack on the 16th. By four o'clock in the morning of the 17th when it retired, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties.



(Right: *The village of Courcelette, a main objective of the attack of September 15 - just over a century after the events of the 1st Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

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



Another major action was to follow: an attack on the *Regina Trench* system of October 8-9 was not a success, but rather an expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 11. By that time the Royal Canadian Regiment was to be in the Lens sector, some fifty kilometres to the north.

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



In fact, the unit would be marching in that direction – westward then northward - within days of having fought at *Regina Trench*. Once at Lens the unit once again began the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches.

(Right below: *A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from *Illustration)**

Thus the winter of 1916-1917 was to pass in that manner for the Royal Canadian Regiment. The Battalion War Diary is fairly repetitive in its entries: little in the way of infantry action except patrols and the occasional raid – by both sides – all local activity; and most casualties due to German artillery and snipers. Then, in the month of March, there came special training and preparations for another British and Commonwealth offensive.



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Among these exercises were to be some different developments: use of captured enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; plaster of Paris scale models and the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

On April 9 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 an overall disappointment: the French offensive was to be a further disaster.

(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

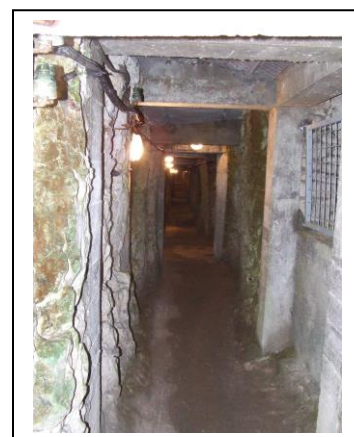
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade serving under Canadian command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it entirely of its German occupants.

Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines - and beyond - of *Vimy Ridge*, an underground network which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack. But it was not every unit which was to avail of their protection; to what extent did the RCR before and during April 9 is not clear.

(Right: *Grange Tunnel, one of the few remaining still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later. The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion was later to use it for billets during a part of the month of May while it was working on nearby roads.* – photograph from 2008(?))



It was the 3rd Division – of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4th Division whose objective had been Vimy Ridge itself, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions having undertaken operations on the right and southern side of the main slope.

Of the ten thousand Canadian casualties of the day, the Royal Canadian Regiment incurred fifty-six *killed in action*, one-hundred sixty-five *wounded*, and sixty-five *missing in action*.

The Germans, having lost the Ridge and the advantages of the high ground, retreated some three kilometres in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times was made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May.

The five-week *Battle of Arras* having terminated, the Royal Canadian Regiment was once again to face a long period of trench warfare. This was not to be so for many of the other units in the Canadian Corps which were serving in sectors from Vimy in the south to Béthune to the north. In fact, the Canadians had some offensive work planned.



(Right above: *The village of Loos, just north-west of Lens, already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir*)

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



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

(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*)

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

On August 15, a major attack was launched by Canadian troops in the suburbs of the city of Lens and just to the north, in the area of a small rise known as *Hill 70*. The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion, however, was not a part of this particular offensive and on that day was in fact busy in training at Lapugnoy. As far as anything of military importance on that day was concerned, the Battalion War Diarist was sparing with his ink: *Nil*.



Hill 70 was taken and held by the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions*.

The Canadian efforts had been expected to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and then the Canadians were ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.

It was just over seven weeks after the capture of *Hill 70*, on October 6, that the Royal Canadian Regiment began to make its way on foot and by train, to the area of the Franco-Belgian border. Later that same day the unit was being billeted in the northern French town of Bailleul.

But it was not to be until October 23 when, having travelled in a circuitous route, again on foot and by train, the RCR was to find itself in the war zone of the *Ypres Salient*.

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

(Right: *The railway station at Ypres (Ieper) in 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign into which the Canadians were about to be flung – already ongoing since the end of that July - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.

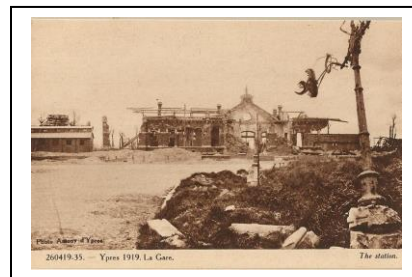
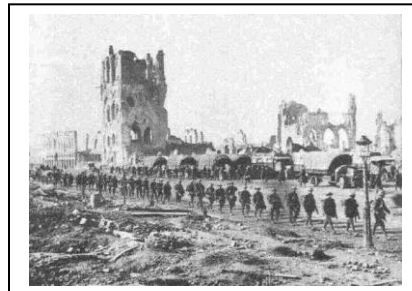
(Right: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians standing in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.

(Right: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

From November 5 until the *official* end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true, and it was troops of the 2nd Division which were to finally enter the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

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From October 23 until the end of the month the RCR was in reserve in the area of Sin Jaan contributing to carrying-, working- and stretcher-parties. On the 30th it moved forward, was involved peripherally in an attack by the 3rd Division and then remained in the lines until relieved on November 4 – all of this at a cost of two-hundred fifty-eight casualties.



(Right: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the Canadian monument. – photograph from 2010*)

It was not until November 14 that the Royal Canadian Regiment was back in the trenches where they intersected what in peace-time had been the road leading north from Passchendaele (today *Passendale*) to the community of Westroosebeke*.

There it was almost continually shelled for three days, incurring fifty casualties while sheltering in the trenches, before withdrawing from its positions – and from the 3rd *Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele* – on the morning of November 18.

**The Battalion's positions were also atop the Passchendaele Ridge.*

(Right: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial. – photograph from 2010*)



Two days later again, on November 20, the unit was back in northern France, at Rely, some eighteen kilometres to the west of Béthune, there to be re-joined by Private Bearn.

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As foreseen by the War Diarist, the posting to Rely was exactly one month in duration. It was spent by the Battalion in various activities, none of which involved being shot at: church parades, rifle practice, use of smoke bombs, lectures, a concert, sports and a number of route marches.



(Right: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from *Le Miroir**)

Although the officer responsible for the War Diary appears to have neglected to enter it in his journal, the month of December offered something a little different to all the Canadian formations which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election.

Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least some units, was in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

The Battalion moved out of the encampment at Rely on December 21 to be bussed to the south-east, and within two days was in billets in hutments near the remnants of the village of Souchez. There it remained – it snowed on Christmas Day - until the 28th of the month.



(Right above: The village of Souchez already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir)

(Right: The caption translated reads simply: a northern sector held by the Canadians – this photograph being of part of the city and coal-mining of Lens. – from Le Miroir)

The following six months were spent by the RCR Battalion in the Lens Sector, Lens being the major mining centre in the region just to the north of Arras and Vimy. This time was irregularly divided as ever into postings in the front lines, in the support lines some hundreds of metres back, and also in reserve, some of these latter positions withdrawn at distances to be measured in kilometres.



The days were occupied – depending on the whereabouts of the unit – in such distractions as work parties, German artillery and gas bombardments, patrols and wiring parties, sports, parades, lectures, the occasional concert, carrying ammunition and supplies to the front, with – particularly while in reserve – not infrequent visits from senior officers.



(Right above: A Canadian carrying party advancing to the front lines loaded with equipment for upcoming operations – from Le Miroir)

Private Bearn's Battalion was one of those to be spared the fighting of March and April when the Germans launched their great spring offensive, codenamed *Michael*, in the area of *the Somme*.

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 delivered a massive attack, Operation *Michael*, on March 21.



(continued)

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of - and also just to the south of - the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops stationed there.

(Preceding page: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for a month, 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 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 successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*



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

However, the RCR Battalion remained in *the Lens Sector*, apparently largely unaffected by the developments in either *the Somme* to the south, or in Flanders, to the north. Likewise unperturbed for the most part was its existence at the front, in support, or in reserve.

On June 29 the unit moved into the front lines in the Neuville-St-Vaast Sector. For the next several days the enemy – and particularly his artillery activity – was recorded as *quiet and below normal* in the Battalion War Diary. On July 1, a single *other rank* was wounded by the enemy – a second suffered a self-inflicted injury – and two days later three other ranks were likewise *wounded in action*.

On July 4, an excerpt from the War Diary entry for the day reads as follows: *Hostile Artillery shelled Battalion Headquarters and vicinity but caused no casualties**. But there apparently were.

**However, it would seem that the number of casualties recorded day by day does not correspond to the count documented at the end of the tour: the day by day count records a total of eight wounded or sick. The totals for the tour as were reported on July 6 as being two killed in action and twelve wounded.*

The son of Thomas T. Bearn, provisions, *groceries and furniture retailer*, of Water Street, St. John’s, Newfoundland, as early as 1877, and of Alice Bearn (née *Thomas*), recorded as *business partner* and latterly *grocery retailer* – by 1924 citing her place of residence as San Diego, California – he was also brother to at least Eugene and perhaps Samuel.

Private Bearn was recorded as having been *killed in action* serving with “B” Company in the trenches on July 4 of 1918.

Alexander Bearns had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-eight years and six months: his date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, however, is recorded as either June or January 17, of 1888.

Private Alexander Bearns 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 26, 2023.