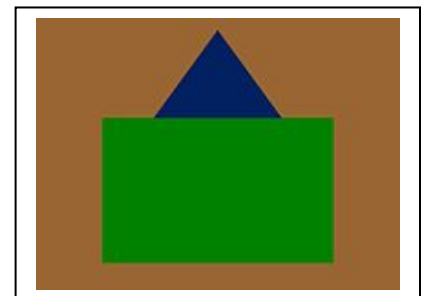


Private Wilfred Bennett (Number 877516) of the 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as those of both fisherman and labourer, there seems to be little indication as to when Wilfred Bennett made his way from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Dominion of Canada. He apparently enlisted in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, on March 19 of 1916 before passing a medical examination and being attested two days later on the 21st.



(Previous page: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 73rd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

Upon his enlistment on March 19, Private Bennett was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) of the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force, this posting being made official on April 26 of the same year – and likely at Broughton* - by the Battalion's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day who on that day declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**The almost-abandoned town of Broughton* on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and not far distant to the south of Sydney, was where the 185th Battalion had been originally based; up to twelve-hundred soldiers could be accommodated there at any one time.*

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 thus, heavily in debt, had gone bankrupt in 1907.

By early 1916, the authorities had decided to form the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade; the 185th was to be one of its four battalions. This new formation was assembled at Camp Aldershot in May of 1916 where intensive training was thereafter undergone until the time of the Brigade's departure overseas. Thus Private Bennett may have become familiar with both Broughton and Aldershot.

The 185th Battalion did not take passage to the United Kingdom for a further five-and-a-half months. On October 11 – a second source says the 12th - of 1916, the thirty-five officers, fifty-two sergeants and nine-hundred fifty-three *other ranks* of the unit boarded His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* – sister ship to *Britannic*, she to be sunk by a mine in the Mediterranean Sea in November later that year, and also to the ill-starred *Titanic* – in Halifax harbour.

(Right: *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*)



Having eventually sailed on October 13, *Olympic* docked six days later, on October 19 – a second source has the 18th - in the English west-coast port of Liverpool.

Private Bennett's 185th Battalion did not take ship alone on *Olympic* for the crossing to the United Kingdom. At the time one of the largest ships afloat, she also had on board the following units: one-half of the 166th Battalion, the 85th, the 188th, the 193rd and also the 219th Battalions of Canadian Infantry – the last two both of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade: a total of some six thousand military personnel.

(continued)

The 185th Battalion War Diary begins recording its history only on January 1 of 1917 and situates the unit at Witley Camp in the county of Surrey on that date; it is, however, likely that Private Bennett and his unit had been transported there upon their arrival at Liverpool. The Diarist also records the dispersal of the personnel of the 185th to other battalions, primarily to the 85th – newly-arrived on the same voyage and forming in England – to the 73rd, to which Private Bennett was later to be attached – already serving on *the Somme* at the time - and to the 25th*

**The practice seems to have been to assign re-enforcements arriving at the Canadian camps in England, often - but not always - to Reserve Battalions, thence – on paper - to the various battalions already serving on the Continent; the troops were then shipped across the English Channel in re-enforcement drafts to those serving units to which they had been assigned, usually via the Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre – later at Étapes.*

Perhaps it was there at Witley that Private Bennett was attached temporarily to the 23rd Reserve Battalion at some point (see above in italics). A transfer to this unit is mentioned in his files, that occasion being when he was also recorded as making his way *from Witley en route to the Continent**.

**On the other hand, it is also recorded that he was directly transferred from the 185th to the 73rd Battalion on December 5, 1916.*

On December 6 of 1916, Private Bennett was recorded as being *on strength* at the Canadian Base Depot established near to Le Havre at the mouth of the River Seine. It was not a long posting as it was apparently on the following day that he left there to seek out his parent unit *in the field*. This he did on the following day again, joining the 73rd Battalion on the morrow, December 8.



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

* * * * *

The 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4th Canadian Division. The Division had been transferred from England to the Continent in August of 1916, arriving, as Private Bennett was to do, at Le Havre. The 73rd Battalion had spent two days at the Canadian Infantry Base Depot there before travelling northward on two trains.

Passing through the larger French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, the unit had de-trained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe. The 73rd Battalion had arrived in the rear area of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the Great War, and where the by-now veteran Canadian 1st Division was to aid in the formation of the newcomers.



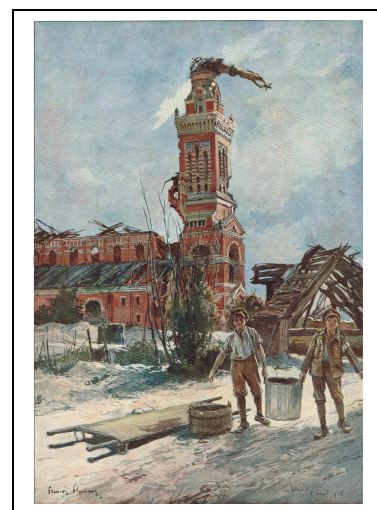
(Preceding page: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

The 73rd Battalion had subsequently – and briefly – experienced the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches of the Western Front. After a final tour in the forward area, it was relieved on September 23rd and the unit's short experience of the *Ypres Salient* thus drew to a close. The Battalion casualties for the month had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – extremely light for *the Salient*.

The troops which arrived to take the place of the Canadians on that day had been Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting, in the first battle to be called by that name.

After several days of changing billets, the 73rd Battalion spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations in the cauldron from which its Irish acquaintances had just retired.

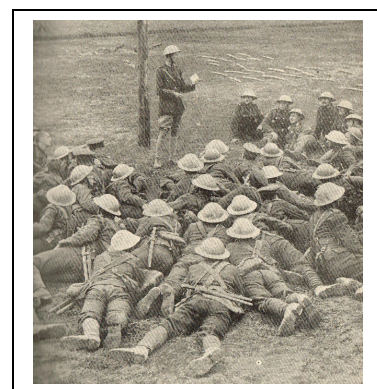
On October 3 the Battalion marched to nearby Arques where it entrained. On the following day it arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from where it marched in pouring rain to Beauval where billets had been prepared to receive it. On succeeding days the unit marched again: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it underwent a period of training, then on the 13th through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at Tara Hill where it... *Bivouaced (sic) in a muddy field (War Diary)*... and provided various working parties for the next dozen or so days.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers at work in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

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

On that first day 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.



(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, in September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)

As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first 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 had been in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



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

The 73rd Battalion had arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene were being withdrawn, in several cases necessitated by the high incidence of casualties.



On October 26, the 73rd Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now mounds of debris - of Pozieres and Contalmaison.



(Right above and right: *The remnants of Pozieres just after the conflict, with the Australian Memorial in the gloom - and also as it is almost a century later – from a vintage post-card and from 2016*)

There it remained in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when it moved forward once more, 'A' Company being *in support* at a junction of two trench systems. This was to prove to be a short tour which terminated on the night of November 2-3; there had been no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery was apparently active at times: casualties were eight killed, forty-three wounded and twenty-six others evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.



(Right above: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from *Le Miroir**)

During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72nd and 73rd to lead in this attack...*

On the late evening of November 11 the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*

In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, the attack by the Canadians was not to be delivered as planned. Instead the various units were ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear re-enforced by information elicited from German prisoners.

It would appear that neither side moved, and that the Canadians spent two days preparing for something that never came about. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides influenced the decision not to attack.

On the night of November 13-14, the 73rd Battalion was withdrawn, its place taken in the line by the 47th Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period were, all told, fourteen killed and thirty-eight wounded.

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



Two more weeks were to pass before the 73rd Battalion was to leave behind it the *1st Battle of the Somme - the last Battalion in the last Brigade of Canadians to leave the SOMME* (Battalion War Diary) - and to the casualty count was to be added at least a further sixty. The withdrawal itself had been made on foot, commencing on November 29 with the unit marching to the west before turning northwards to pass behind the battered city of Arras. The trek continued beyond Arras, to Ruitz, where it arrived on December 5. There the Battalion was to remain for the next seventeen days, in billets which were reportedly – at least at the outset – *...in poor condition.*

It was then and there that Private Bennett reported to duty.

* * * * *

It was there, at Ruitz, on the 9th day of the month, that the Battalion War Diarist noted the arrival of... *A draft of 150 other ranks* received from 185th Highland Battalion from Nova Scotia. Men were all of good physique, intelligent and had a smart appearance...*

**There is no mention of a draft having arrived on the day before as Private Bennet's documents record.*

(Right above: *A detachment from a Canadian-Scottish regiment, proceeded by its pipe band, marches toward the front. – from Le Miroir*)



It was not to be until Christmas Eve that Private Bennett likely received his first taste of life in the front-line trenches* – or in the support trenches a few hundred metres to the rear - as it was on that day that the 73rd relieved the 46th Canadian Battalion in the area of Souchez.



(Right above: *The village of Souchez even before the arrival of the Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)

**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: 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)



The occasions spent in reserve were opportunities for training, lectures, inspections by the upper echelons – usually the further away from the front, the more important the visitor – route marches, sports, with perhaps the odd concert or other entertainment coming to support the troops.

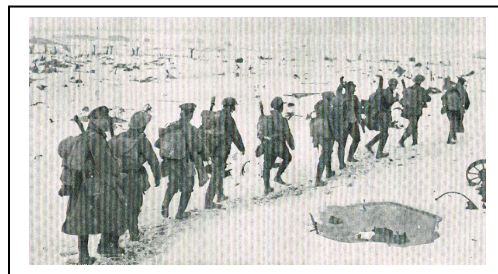
(Right: Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir)



In the forward areas life was both hard and monotonous, if also inevitably at times dangerous: there were parties of the construction, wiring and carrying variety. Patrolling and raids on a local scale were often the norm, as were rat-catching and lice hunts. Most casualties were caused by enemy artillery - and occasionally one's own – although snipers were also a constant peril.

During that winter of 1917, there was little concerted infantry activity undertaken by either side; nevertheless, in the case of the 73rd Battalion, a major enemy raid was repulsed on January 7th, and the unit undertook a costly large-scale such operation on March 1.

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



After that latter exercise, the Battalion was withdrawn into reserve from March 4 to 16; then it was back in the line for three days before moving back into support positions at Cabaret Rouge*.

**The British Cemetery of the same name, Cabaret Rouge, is the one from which the body of the Canadian Unknown Soldier was exhumed on May 16 of the year 2000, to lie in Ottawa, in front of the National War Memorial.*

(Right: A part of Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery, Souchez – photograph from 2010)



It was not until March 30 that the Battalion was then ordered into Brigade Reserve at Chateau de la Haie. There it began – as did many other Canadian units – a week of intensive training and preparation. The *Battle of Arras* was in the offing.

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.



The British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment: the French offensive was to be a disaster.

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

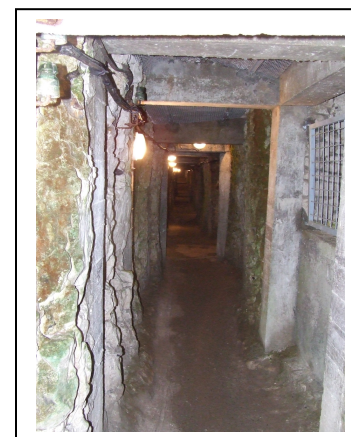


(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack.

The 73rd Battalion War Diary records that the unit had already been in the area of the front line for three days when 'A' and 'C' Companies entered *Coburg Subway (Tunnel)* at eleven o'clock in the morning of April 8. They were to remain there only hours before the moment of the early-morning attack some eighteen-and-a-half hours later.



(continued)

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

‘B’ Company was moved into trenches and was kept in Brigade Reserve. Later in the day it was to support the 78th Battalion whereas ‘D’ Company was to re-enforce the 72nd Battalion. There appears, unfortunately, to be no indication as to the Company in which Private Bennett served at Vimy.

This was the first occasion on which the Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as a Canadian Army Corps rather than been individually attached to a British force. In fact, British forces were now under its command.

At five-thirty on the morning of April 9, mines were detonated under the German lines and the creeping barrage commenced, followed immediately by the infantry close behind.



The War Diary reported that the first objectives of the day were in the hands of the 73rd only ten minutes later, at five-forty, and also that the first prisoners were being sent back at the same time.

(Right above: *German prisoners being sent on their way back under escort through the Canadian lines – from Illustration*)

The son of Peter P. Bennett, fisherman – to whom he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - and of Elizabeth Bennett (née *Tourout(?)*) – to both of whom he had willed his all - of Ship Cove, Port au Port, in the District of St. George, Newfoundland, he was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 9, 1917, during the attack on Vimy Ridge*.



Wilfred Bennett had enlisted at the age of twenty years and eleven months: date of birth, April 5, 1895.

(Right above: *The photograph of Private Bennett is from the ‘WW1 men A-B, Coates, Cambridgeshire: A One-Place Study Web-site’. The site suggests that he ‘died of wounds’, this according to an unidentified news report of May 5, 1917.*)

Private Wilfred Bennett 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.

