



Private Thomas William Blunden (Number 478808) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Écoivres Military Cemetery, Mont St-Éloi: Grave Reference III.J.18.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a carpenter, Thomas William Blunden is *possibly* the young man who took ship from his native Dominion of Newfoundland on May 2 of 1913, to travel to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

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

If this were to be true, he sailed from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, on board the SS *Bruce*, and then at some time – perhaps immediately by train - made his way to Halifax where he was to enlist some two-and-a-half years later.

That enlistment and his attestation took place on November 15 of 1915, on the same day that he underwent his medical examination. He was immediately attached to ‘C’ Company of the Royal Canadian Regiment and on the following day was reporting to the unit’s local Base Depot. There its Commanding Officer 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.*

After some four months of training, the 2nd Draft of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Private Blunden one of its number, boarded His Majesty’s Transport *Olympic* on April 1, 1916. Four days later, on April 5, the vessel sailed from Halifax harbour for the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom.



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

The vessel, one of the largest afloat at the time, was sister-ship to *Britannic* – to be sunk in the Mediterranean later that year and to the ill-starred *Titanic*. *Olympic* was capable of accommodating well over six-thousand troops*.

Thus, hardly surprisingly, Private Blunden and his 2nd Draft were not to take passage alone to England. Also on board *Olympic* were the following units: the 1st Draft, Royal Canadian Regiment; the 5th Univ. (*University?*) Company for the PPCLI**; the 59th, 67th and 71st Battalions of Canadian Infantry; the Number 1 Party, 224th Battalion of Canadian Infantry; the Number 4 Siege Battery of the Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery; the 5th Draft, Number 2 Canadian Field Ambulance, B Section; the Ontario Military Hospital.

Olympic docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool six days after her departure from Canada, on April 11.

**The usual number accommodated was about six-thousand five-hundred.*

**Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, named for the youngest daughter of the Duke of Connaught, Governor General of Canada at the time*

By the following day Private Blunden’s Battalion had travelled by train to East Sandling*, to the south down the coast from the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent. There he was *taken on strength* by the 11th (*Reserve*) Battalion – for quarantine purposes?



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

Some two weeks later, on the 27th, he had been posted to the Base Depot of the RCR and of the PPCLI (*Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry*) at Cæsar's Camp* – possibly the site of the first Roman camp in England – atop a spur of the cliffs that run along this coast. He was also back on *strength* of the RCR.

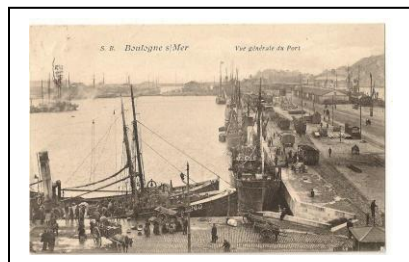
**East Sandling and Cæsar's Camp were two of the many components of the large Canadian military complex which collectively is known as Shorncliffe.*

Not a full six weeks were then to elapse before Private Blunden was called upon to proceed to *active service* on the Continent – the date was June 6, 1916. A single official source curiously documents him as... *reverts to ranks at own request on proceeding overseas...* but there is nothing else in his files, even when one includes his pay sheets, which appears to record any prior promotion.



(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*)

It is almost certain that Private Blunden's draft took passage across the English Channel from Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the opposite coast - and only some two hours' sailing-time distant. From there the new arrivals were transferred to the Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Le Havre, reporting there on the next day.



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

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

The day on which Private Blunden reported *to duty* with the parent unit *in the field* is not certain, although the one date that *is* recorded implies that it may have been on or about June 14. However, the Battalion War Diary entries of June 9, 10 and 11, are the only close dates on which are mentioned reinforcements: eighty *other ranks*, one-hundred nineteen *other ranks*, and eighty-one *other ranks* respectively.



It appears that Private Blunden was to join the Battalion in the northern French commune of Steenvoorde. Having recently incurred heavy losses (see below), the unit had retired there and was in the process of resting, re-organizing and – of course – re-enforcing.

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Perhaps surprisingly, 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 to the United Kingdom. In fact, it had initially been sent for a year to act as garrison of the British possession of Bermuda.

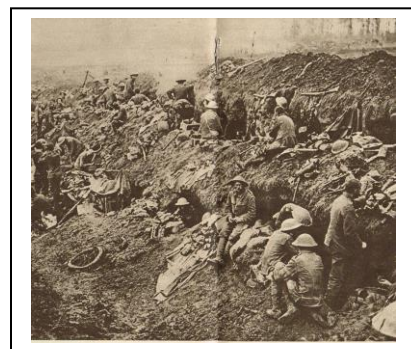
After it had been returned home in the summer of 1915 and then ordered overseas in that August, it had been attached to the 7th Infantry Brigade of the newly-forming 3rd Canadian Division. The RCR had then been transferred to the Continent on November 1 of 1915, and immediately sent to the area of Kemmel, on the Belgian side of the Franco-Belgian frontier.



(Right: *Troops – said to be British, but the Canadians wore British Uniforms – on the march in the north of France during the early period of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The 3rd Canadian Division had officially taken up its responsibilities on the Continent as of mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. Many of its formations were already by then in situ, as was the case with the RCR, and the Division was to remain for the following three months in that southern area of the Kingdom of Belgium. It was there that its units 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*)

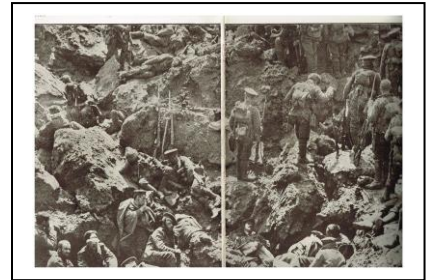
While there was little, if any, concerted infantry action on that part of the front which had become the responsibility of the Canadian 3rd Division, the routines of the day kept the units busy. At the forward area there was construction, consolidation and improvement of trenches and defensive positions,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

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In April there was a more serious confrontation in the sector which was the responsibility of the 2nd Canadian Division. It involved at first the British and then later, the Canadians. The RCR would only hear the rumble of the guns.

That *Battle of 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 prepared a series of mines under the German lines, mines which they detonated on that March 27, and which was subsequently followed by an infantry attack.

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They had 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 only a further six weeks before the Canadian 3rd Division and the Royal Canadian Regiment were to experience their own baptism of fire.

During the period that the action at St-Éloi was ongoing, the 3rd Canadian Division had been on the move. In the last days of March and at the beginning of April its units had been transferring from the border area to the south-east sector of the Ypres Salient, a lethal place at the best of times. By April 4 the Royal Canadian Regiment had been posted to the area of the village of Zillebeke and of what became known as *Railway Dugouts*.



The sounds of the German artillery at St-Éloi was no longer a concern: in the first days of the tour, the unit incurred more than a dozen casualties, all from shell-fire.

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

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Maple Copse* and of *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 the troops were 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: *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 had 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 this 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 had been 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 – and fourteen missing, all of whom eventually returned *to duty* – plus six officers.



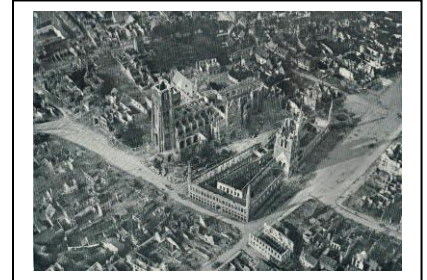
(Right: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014*)

On June 7 the Battalion retired even further to the west, to Steenvoorde, across the border and in France, which is most likely when and where Private Blunden reported *to duty*.

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If it were that Private Blunden reported to duty with one of those afore-mentioned three drafts of mid-June of 1916, it was at a time when the unit had been withdrawn into reserve and billeted in or near the northern French community of Steenvoorde. It was to remain there until the night of the 21-22 when it was bussed to Ypres and from there proceeded on foot to the front lines to relieve the 2nd Battalion of the Irish Guards.

On the 26th, relieved in their turn, the RCR withdrew to the remnants of Ypres, there to supply men for work, wiring and carrying parties. Four days later, the unit moved to the rear again, to Camp 'B', to the west of Ypres and in the direction of Poperinghe.



(Right: *A Belgian aerial photograph taken in 1915-1916 and captioned – already by then - 'Ypres-la-Morte' (Ypres the Dead) – from Illustration)*

The following two months were spent by the RCR Battalion in the same area. The unit's time was irregularly divided into postings in the front lines, in the support lines some hundreds of metres back, and also in reserve. There was little concerted infantry activity during this period although the unit was involved in sporadic raiding of enemy positions – in some cases successful, in others, *not* so – and of course at times the Germans did some raiding of their own.

At the end of August the RCR retired to the area of Cassel in order to train for the Battalion's upcoming participation in the ongoing British summer offensive at *the Somme*. On September 7 the unit was on the move, at first by train but then latterly on foot; it arrived at the large camp at the Brickfields (*La Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert in the *Département de la Somme* on September 13.

The *First Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for well over two 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 span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

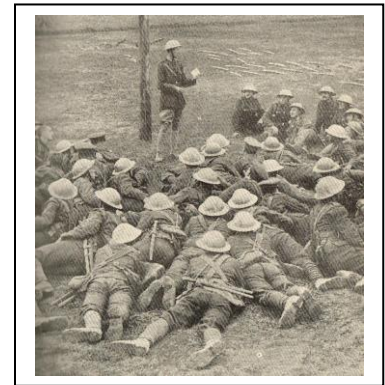
On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.



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

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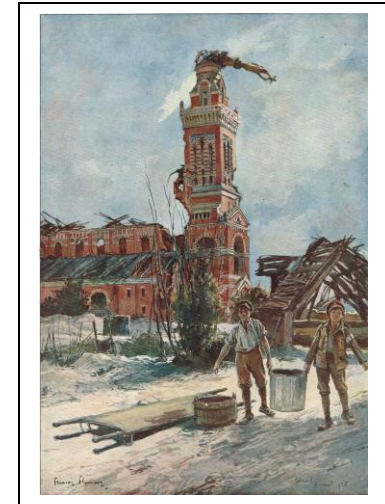
As the Battle had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first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



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

(Right: *Canadian soldiers carrying water in Albert, the already-damaged basilica, Notre-Dame de Brebières, in the background – from Illustration*)

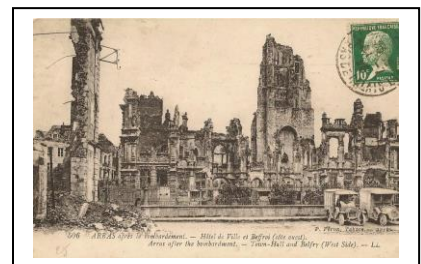
The RCR's first action at *the Somme* was a far from auspicious occasion. Having been ordered to attack a German strong-point and trench system on September 16, this the unit did, to be beaten back with dreadful losses, some two-hundred seventy killed, wounded or missing.



On either the following day or the one thereafter the RCR Battalion retired from the field to a succession of venues – still incurring casualties on occasion, mostly due to German artillery - not to return to the front until October 2.

Two further short tours in the forward area had been concluded by October 10 on which date the unit withdrew to Warloy, west of Albert. For the fighting battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment, the *First Battle of the Somme* was over.

Private Blunden's unit had then begun to move – again on foot – in a wide semi-circle to the westward of the lines and then northward behind the city of Arras, finally to finish in the area of Neuville St-Vaast, to the north-west of that afore-mentioned battered city on October 24.



The Battalion War Diarist reports that the unit was in the trenches of the sector on the following day.

(Right above: *The remnants of the City Hall and bell-tower of the shattered city of Arras soon after the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *The village of Souchez, adjacent to Neuville St-Vaast, already looked this way in September of 1915 – from Le Miroir*)



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Twenty of the thirty days on November were spent in those trenches, the sector apparently for the most part quiet during this period. It was also wet and cool. The beginning of the month of December passed likewise.

On December 9, on the second day of the latest tour in the trenches the Battalion War Diarist notes no action and no casualties – nor for the day preceding, nor for the one following... *Situation quiet.*

There appears to be nothing in his documents – no medical reports - to clarify the circumstances of Private Blunden's death, even though Écoivres is not a front-line cemetery, and was in the area of Brigade Reserve at the time. One might speculate a long-range artillery strike – but it is just that: speculation.

(Right above and right: *The village of St-Éloi – in whose boundaries lies Écoivres Military Cemetery - at an early period of the Great War and again, a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016)*



**Not to be confused with the village of St-Éloi, Belgium, where the 2nd Canadian Division fought in the spring of 1916.*

The son of William Blunden, fisherman, and Rebecca Jane Blunden (née *Ginn*) of Indian Islands, Fogo District, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Bertha, to John, to Harry and to Joshua-Howe*. Private Blunden was reported as having been *killed in action* on December 9, 1916.

Thomas William Blunden had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-seven years: date of birth, February 26, 1888.

**Private Joshua Howe Blunden of the 4th Battalion, Canadian Machine-Gun Corps, buried in Quarry Wood Cemetery, Sains-les-Marquion, was reported as having been killed in action on either September 27 or 29, 1918. (See elsewhere in these documents.)*

(Right above: *The grave of Private J.H. Blunden in Quarry Wood Cemetery – photograph from 2016)*

Private Thomas William Blunden 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 27, 2023.