

Private Harold George Brooking (Number 438750) of the 52nd Battalion (New Ontario), Canadian Infantry, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-flash of the 52nd Battalion (New Ontario) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of an engineer, it appears to be that Harold George Brooking crossed the waters from Newfoundland to the Dominion of Canada with his mother, Sarah, and siblings William and Phyllis in the year 1892. The 1901 Census has them living at that time in Sydney, Nova Scotia; the 1911 Census has Harold and his mother then residing in Port Arthur, Ontario.

It was in fact at Port Arthur that Harold Brooking presented himself for medical examination, enlisted and was attested, apparently all on the same May 10 of 1915. His record states that he had previously served in the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifle Regiment – later to become the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifle Battalion – but it was, in fact, to be ‘A’ Company of the 52nd Battalion (*New Ontario*), just in the throes of being formed in the area of Port Arthur, to which he was attached on the day of his enlistment.

Private Brooking was eventually *officially taken on strength* on the same May 10 by the Commanding Officer himself, Lieutenant Colonel Hay, who declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me...I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation**.

Private Brooking was to train for the succeeding six months in the vicinity of one of the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William*, the activities of these two separate groups of recruits being co-ordinated by the Commanding Officer of the Battalion who was based in the Armouries at Port Arthur. At the beginning there were no barrack facilities available and so the fledgling soldiers were billeted with the local populations.

**Port Arthur and Fort William amalgamated in 1970 to become the city of Thunder Bay.*

The summer was to be spent in camp – but first of all the camp had to be built. It was apparently done quite economically as it was the Battalion personnel who provided the labour. The camp itself was established in an area known as *Gresley Park* at a distance of some five kilometres from the city of Port Arthur.



It was taken over by the parent unit on June 15, the day after the First Draft of the 52nd Battalion had left for overseas service.

(Right above: *Gresley Park Camp, likely during the summer or autumn of 1915 – from the World War One Thunder Bay Centennial Project web-site*)

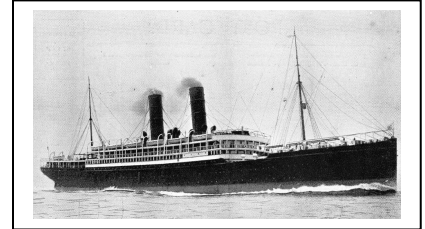
On November 3rd, 1915, camp was struck and the entire unit moved into the Armoury at Port Arthur, where it remained all day, and that night, in the midst of a snow storm, the 52nd Battalion of Port Arthur and Fort William, marched aboard two trains, and left its depot town to answer the call of the Colors. (The above information and excerpt from the Port Arthur News Chronicle, it in turn from the Thunder Bay Public Library web-site)

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It was while he was in training at Gresley Park, that on at least two occasions Private Brooking ran afoul of the regimental authorities: in July it had been an unidentified misdemeanour which was to merit three him three days' detention; and in September, *interfering with the Regimental Military Police* had netted him a further twenty-three days' detention, of which twelve had eventually been remitted.

More curious, perhaps, is that Private Brooking was also recorded as having been absent from a pay parade during the month of October.

As reported above, early November saw the 52nd Battalion transferred from Port Arthur by train – via Ottawa - to St. John, New Brunswick, there on November 23 to take ship on board the SS *California*, the vessel sailing for the United Kingdom later on that same day. *California* docked in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport some ten days later, on December 3.



Private Brooking and his Battalion were not alone in taking passage on *California*. On board were three other military units: the 9th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 34th Battalion of Canadian Infantry, and a contingent of the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps Reserve.

(Right above: *The photograph of the Anchor Line ship SS California is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

From Plymouth, Private Brooking's Battalion entrained for Witley Camp in the county of Surrey. There the unit was to spend almost eight weeks training under the guidance of British instructors before the Canadians were ordered to the military establishment in the vicinity of the villages of Bramshott and Liphook in the county of Hampshire where it reported on January 25. The Battalion was to remain there for a bare three weeks.



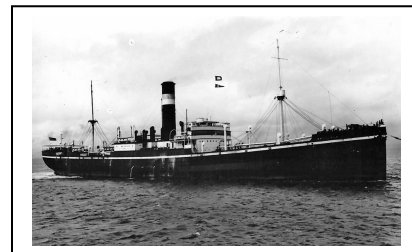
(Right above: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

There had apparently been further trouble for Private Brooking towards the end of the period spent at Witley: he had been fined – the amount seems to read as two dollars which was two days' pay – and he had later been awarded twenty-eight days detention for, on January 20, drunkenness and for having struck an NCO. Where he underwent this detention is not clear.

It was on board the requisitioned SS *Matheran* – to be later sunk by a mine in 1917 – that 'A' Company of the 52nd Battalion, Private Brooking among its ranks, left the English port-city of Southampton *en route* for the Continent on February 20, 1916.

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(Right: *The photograph of the SS Matheran is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)



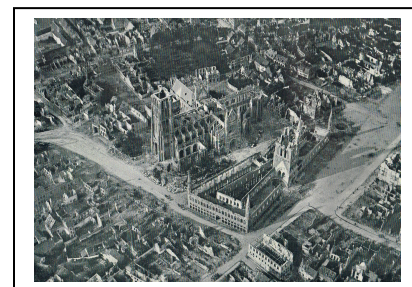
Disembarking in the French port of Le Havre on the following morning, the unit proceeded to the nearby Canadian General Base Depot where it was to spend the night under canvas – in a snowstorm – before being despatched by train north to Belgium on the morrow.

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



Travelling via the northern French town of Hazebrouck, the 52nd Battalion – just over one-thousand strong all ranks - arrived in the Belgian community of Poperinghe at about three o'clock in the afternoon of February 23, the unit's companies thereupon marching to their various billets.

The 52nd Battalion (*New Ontario*) was one of the units of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component, since January of 1916, of the 3rd Canadian Division. The 3rd Division was itself only newly formed, as of December of 1915, and most of its personnel were only now adjusting to the life of a soldier. The Canadian 3rd Division's first posting – temporary as it transpired – was to a sector to the south-west of Ypres.



During the third and fourth weeks of March, 1915, the 3rd Division was transferred into the *Ypres Salient*, an area which had already proved itself to be one of the most lethal theatres of the entire *Western Front*.

(Right above: *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*)

Meanwhile, having arrived only two days previously, Private Brooking was in trouble once more: on February 25 he was charged with i) *Falling out of ranks to buy liquor* ii) *Drunk* and iii) *Resisting arrest*. On this occasion he was awarded fourteen days of Field Punishment #1* by the Commanding Officer.

**Field Punishment No. 1 consisted of the convicted man being placed in fetters and handcuffs or similar restraints and attached to a fixed object, such as a gun wheel or a fence post, for up to two hours per day. Apparently the soldier could also be subjected to hard labour and loss of pay. (Adapted from Wikipedia)*

Two months later the 52nd Battalion was by then serving in the south-east sector of the *Ypres Salient*... and Private Brooking was still having his problems: having been brought before a Field General Court Martial for two counts of drunkenness on April 13, he was allotted a further ninety days of the same Field Punishment #1.

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Whether Private Brooking ever paid the full penalty appears not to be specified, but subsequent events may have played a part in the matter.

For the two weeks after its arrival in Belgium, the 52nd Battalion had undergone training in trench warfare. From March 10, the date of its first posting to the front, until early June of 1916, the newcomers had experienced, at first hand, the daily routines of life in – and out of – the trenches*.

**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 behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearer to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



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

(Right above: Some months later, Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916 – by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less-visible Lee-Enfield rifles (see below) - from Illustration)

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Hooge 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.



(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)



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, a list that included the Commanding Officer of the 52nd Battalion.



(Right above: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)

On the morning of June 2, the Battalion had been out of the line and enjoying a bath when news of the German attack came in; the unit was almost immediately placed on one hour's notice, this later becoming thirty minutes. It was then moved forward to Brigade Reserve, and then further forward again to provide personnel for the upcoming counter-attack which had finally been ordered for the next day, the 3rd. The result of this action has already been seen.

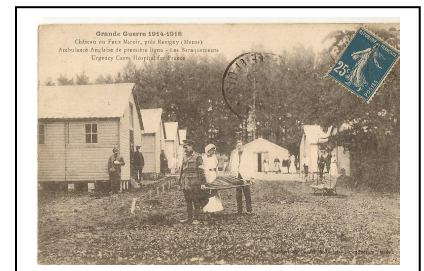


(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014*)

On June 4, 'A' Company was temporarily attached to the 42nd Battalion in order to hold a series of trenches. On the next day, June 5, while being relieved, it was caught in a violent bombardment and incurred further casualties. Thus the Battalion, having retired by June 6, counted the cost for the entire tour and found that it had incurred – including those suffered by 'A' Company - about two-hundred twenty casualties in all.

One of them was Private Brooking who had incurred a gun-shot wound to his right cheek. The exact time, place and circumstances of his injury appear not to be recorded, but by June 6 he had been evacuated to the 10th Canadian Field Ambulance which had been established in the area of Poperinghe.

On the following day he was further transferred, to the 23rd General Hospital in the French coastal town of Étapes. From there, on June 24, he was discharged to the Canadian General Base Depot at Le Havre.



(Right above: *a British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

Four days later again, Private Brooking was reported as having left the Base Depot to re-join his unit – out of the lines at the time - which he apparently did on that same day.

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By July 1, the entire Battalion had moved into the remnants of the city of Ypres where it was to serve as a component of Brigade Reserve, supplying working-parties for salvage. The unit remained in Ypres until the 11th when it retired, eventually to be billeted in the area of Steenvoorde, a town on the French side of the border, on the following day.

On July 18 the Battalion War Diary entry for the day includes the remark... *Parades as yesterday. Officers and men from Battalion sent on courses...* Private Brooking was, however, at the time being admonished for... *refusing to obey an order.*

Only five days afterwards, on July 23, possibly during the transfer from Steenvoorde to Camp St. Lawrence which took three and a half hours to accomplish on that morning, he was further charged with... *falling out on the march without permission.* For this misdemeanour he was awarded fourteen days of the by-now-familiar Field Punishment #1.

Little occurred in the way of concerted infantry activity during that summer in the *Ypres Salient*. The routine of life in the trenches was followed and the majority of casualties – of which there was a steady flow – was mostly due to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers.



It was while at *Camp Toronto* near Poperinghe on August 10, that the Battalion received the British-made Short Lee-Enfield Rifle Mark III to replace the unreliable Ross, and also by then, most if not all of the personnel had been equipped with long-overdue steel helmets.

The troops were then sent back back to the forward and support areas.

(Right above: *The trenches are too prim to likely be the real thing but the troops are wearing their new helmets and carrying Lee-Enfields which are equipped with the older-style sword-bayonets – from Illustration*)

The 52nd Battalion next retired from the forward area and from the *Ypres Salient* on the night of August 20-21 and was ordered once more to move into billets in the area of Steenvoorde in anticipation of ten or twelve days training.

The Canadians were being groomed to play a role in the ongoing British summer offensive on *the Somme*.

By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for some 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 those eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.

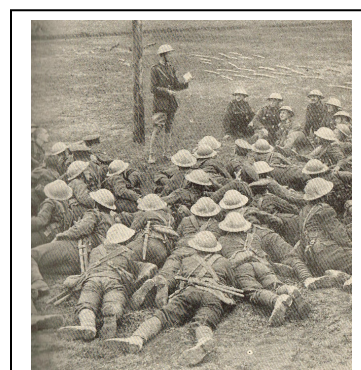
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(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)



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.

(Right: *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**)



In the meantime, the morning of September 7 was to be the start of a busy twenty-four hours for the 52nd Battalion: the unit marched from the Steenevoorde area to Ravinchove where busses transferred the personnel to the railway station at Arques. A train was then taken - passing through Calais, Boulogne and Étaples – arriving at Auxi-le-Chateau, to the north-east of Abbéville, at half-past three in the morning, from where the men proceeded on foot south to Longvillers.

There they halted at eight o'clock in the morning of September 8, almost five hours later, to be despatched to billets in the farms of the area.

From September 10 to 14, Private Brooking's Battalion was on the march – with nightly billets – to arrive on that latter date at the large camp which had been established at the Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

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



On the following day there was to be a general attack in which the Canadians would play a major role. However, the 3rd Canadian Division – and thus the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, and therefore the 52nd Battalion (*New Ontario*) – was to be engaged only in supporting roles on that first day, and held... *in Corps Reserve ready to move off at short notice*. In fact, the Battalion War Diary reports no infantry activity at all for the day of October 15.

This was to change abruptly on the 16th. The 9th Brigade was to follow up an attack to be delivered earlier in the day – at five in the afternoon - by the 7th Brigade, and was itself to then assault German positions known as the *Zollern Redoubt* at half-past six, also in the afternoon.

The attack was to be made in two waves; Private Brooking in 'A' Company was to be on the right of the advance.

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



Even before reaching the jumping-off trenches, the Battalion had incurred heavy losses as it had been obliged to advance under heavy artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire. It was at that point realised that the earlier attack by the 7th Brigade had failed; any action, therefore, by the 52nd Battalion was now pointless. The men were thus ordered to dig in and to hold their present position.

According to the Battalion War Diary entry of the day, casualties by that time already totalled two-hundred fifty-five.

(Right above: *Evacuating Canadian casualties after battle – somewhere on the Somme – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The son of Thomas Brooking, clerk and blacksmith (deceased by the time of enlistment and possibly also by the time of his wife's departure to Cape Breton in 1892), and of Sarah Rebecca Brooking* (née *Cock*, originally from England) of Gaultois – she later of Cape Breton, then later again of 178, Second Street and of 128, Banning Street, both in Port Arthur, Ontario – he was also brother to Mary-Ann-Maria, to Charlotte-Augusta, to William-Alfred, to Thomas (died at the age of one month and twenty days), to Sarah-Agnus(sic) to Edward Thomas, and to Phyllis.

**Her son had allotted to her a monthly fifteen dollars – later twenty – from his pay.*

Private Brooking was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 16 of 1916 while fighting in the *1st Battle of the Somme*.

Harold George Brooking had enlisted at the declared age of thirty-three years: date of birth, May 21, 1883.

Private Harold George Brooking 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.

