



Corporal Frederic Charles Burchell (Number 301241) of the 3rd Division Ammunition Column, Canadian Field Artillery, of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Marœuil British Cemetery: Grave reference III.K.10.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a civil engineer, the 1911 Census documents the year of his arrival in Nova Scotia – presumably from the Dominion of Newfoundland – accompanied by his younger brother Ernest, as 1906.

(Right: *The image of the cap badge of the 11th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade Ammunition Column (3rd Division) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)*



Frederic Charles Burchell enlisted on September 4 – the first date on which the Canadian Army remunerated him for his services – underwent medical examination two days later on the 6th in Halifax, and was attested in the industrial city of Sydney, Nova Scotia, on September 9, 1915. Upon his attestation, he was immediately attached to the 36th Overseas Battery (11th Howitzer Brigade) of the Canadian Field Artillery of the Canadian Expeditionary Force which was based at Sydney.

Either at the time of his enlistment and, if not, certainly during the latter part of September, Gunner Burchell was to receive a first promotion, to the rank of bombardier – the artillery equivalent of lance corporal – with its five-cents per day pay raise.

In the meantime, the Commanding Officer of the Battery, Major Crowe(?), saw fit to bring a close to the formalities of enlistment by declaring, on September 14 – 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.*

It was some three months after Frederick Charles Burchell's enlistment, on December 18, 1915, that the 1st Draft of the 36th Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery – Bombardier Burchell among its number - embarked in St. John, New Brunswick, for passage to the United Kingdom on board His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie*.

It was apparently a total of one-thousand seven-hundred fourteen military personnel which sailed on the vessel that same day en route for the United Kingdom, twenty-two various detachments altogether of the Canadian Military being recorded in the War Diary of the 3rd Canadian Siege Battery.



(Right: *The photograph of HMT Missanabie – here shown with troops having embarked – is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

Nine days after sailing, on December 27, *Missanabie* arrived outside the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport. The troops disembarked there on the following morning and entrained at once for the Canadian military establishment of *Shorncliffe*, a complex established adjacent to the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent. Upon his arrival there, Bombardier Burchell was transferred to the 3rd (Reserve) Battery to prepare for an eventual transfer to the Continent.



(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*)

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



In fact, it appears that Bombardier Burchell was soon to be transferred for a third time, on this occasion – the date undocumented – to the 1st (Reserve) Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery for that short cross-Channel voyage to France. He sailed on April 15, 1916, most likely from nearby Folkestone harbour to the French port of Boulogne, on the coast opposite and some two hours' sailing-time distant.



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

Bombardier Burchell's contingent was then transported to the Canadian Base Depot by then established in the vicinity of Le Havre where he was *taken on strength* by the 3rd Canadian Division Trench Mortar Battery Group.

At the time of his arrival at Le Havre, he received promotion from bombardier to the rank of corporal, on April 16. He left the Base Depot to join his new unit in the field eight days later, on April 24 and is then recorded as having reported *to duty* two days later again, on the 26th.



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

The 3rd Canadian Trench Mortar Battery Group to which Corporal Burchell was to report was just coming into being at this stage of the war. Up until that coming May of 1916 it was still the infantry which was responsible for those weapons; now their operation was to become one of the duties of the Canadian Field Artillery.

At the time of Corporal Burchell's arrival, the unit was in Belgium, in an area of the *Ypres Salient* to the south-east of the city of Ypres, and close to *Sanctuary Wood*.

The Group's War Diary for May of 1916 is a litany of the number of rounds fired each day in the direction of the enemy; on most of the early days of that month that number is a single digit and indeed, on one day, a lack of cartridges precluded any firing at all. Casualties for May were light: *all* of this was about to change.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Hooge, Maple Copse, Railway Dugouts, Sanctuary Wood* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had apparently 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.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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 to the German offensive by organizing a counter-attack on the following day; it was an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground.

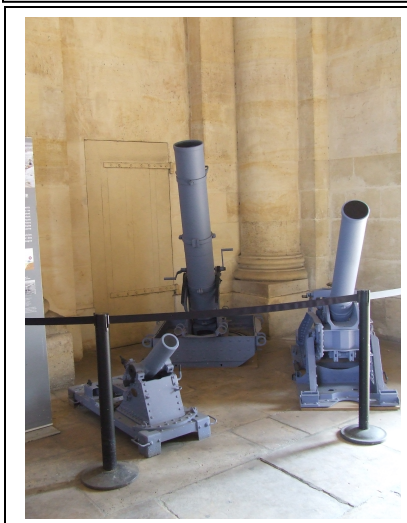
Badly organized, the operation was a horrendous failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(Right: *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*)



Trench mortars are a type of artillery piece which stand on a flat base rather than being built on a carriage with wheels. The base and the elevated angle of the barrel allows the mortar to stand and to be fired from the confines of a trench – as the name implies. But the fact that it is operated from a trench means that it is closer to the enemy than is the classic artillery weapon, and thus that its gun-team shares the dangers that threaten the infantry.

After the enemy bombardments and attacks of June 2, 3 and 4, the Group War Diary recorded that only four gunners were able to report to duty out of the seven crews that had been in action, several of them having been wounded and thereafter taken prisoner.



(Right above: *Trench mortars of various calibres standing in the entrance to the Army Museum, Les Invalides, Paris – photograph from 2015*)

Following those difficult days of early June the group spent its time – as did the infantry – in and out of the forward area; when not in action there was other work to be done: construction, wiring, carrying ammunition and supplies, and salvage work. But in terms of fighting, the remainder of the month after *Mount Sorrel* was relatively quiet.

In fact, it was quiet enough for the 3rd Canadian Division Trench Mortar Battery Group to find that Corporal Burchell was superfluous to its needs. Thus, on July 15, he was transferred to the 3rd Divisional Ammunition Column.

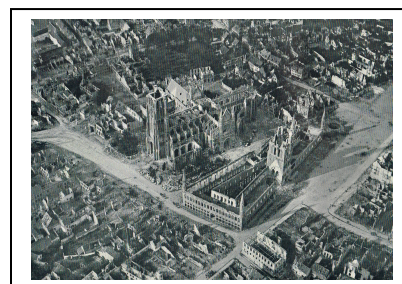
(Right below: *Men and horses of an un-identified ammunition column bringing up shells to an artillery unit – from Le Miroir*)

On that July 15 of 1916, his new formation had – according to its own War Diary – only just landed at Le Havre having arrived from England. It remained in a nearby rest camp there until the morning of the 17th when it proceeded by train to the French northern town of Bailleul where the unit detrained on the morning of the 18th.



From there was ordered to its billets at Steenvoorde, there to remain for the next six days. Although it appears not to be documented, this is likely where Corporal Burchell reported to duty with his new unit.

In September and October of 1916 most of the Canadian units - which had up until that time been stationed in the *Ypres Salient* and at that part of the front between Ypres and the Franco-Belgian border - were to be transferred to the area of the French *Département de la Somme*. There they were to fight during much of the second half of the five-month campaign known as the *First Battle of the Somme* before being moved north once more, to the mining area in the region of Lens.

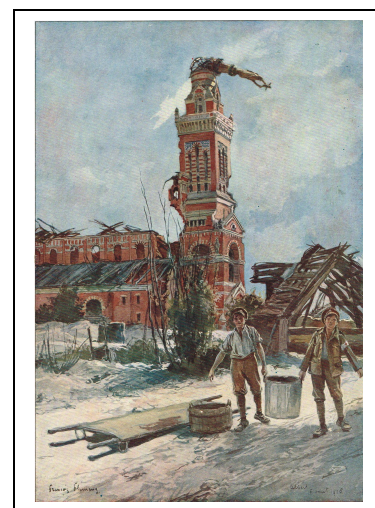


(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

The newly-formed 3rd Canadian Division Ammunition Column, however, was temporarily spared this baptism of fire and remained in or near the *Ypres Salient* until October 3. During much of that time the Column personnel was performing – as the War Diary repeatedly records – *routine duties*.

But then came orders from above. On that October 3, the Column began a five-day march from Poperinghe, a move that ended at the large *Brickfields (la Briqueterie) Camp* near the provincial town of Albert and which, so the War Diarist entered in his journal, had necessitated covering on foot a distance of some eighty-eight miles (about one-hundred forty kilometres).

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



Four days were then spent establishing ammunition dumps following which, until November 26, the War Diarist appears to make entries of only three subjects on his pages: the weather, routine duties and working-parties.

On November 26, *First Somme* by then having officially ended, the 3rd CDAC retired from the area as it had arrived - on foot: twenty-three miles on November 26, twelve-and-a-half miles on November 27, and thirteen-and-a-half miles on November 28. The Column came to rest on that last day at Villers-Brulin, to the north-west of the city of Arras.



(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)

The unit then moved to billets at adjacent Frévin-Capelle where once more the weather and routine duties dominated the War Diary. Even on December 27 the entry read: *Weather – Rain – Working Party still at Gun Positions – Routine Duties.*

War Graves Registry (Circumstances of Casualty): *He was in charge of a heavy trench mortar gun and after it had been loaded, he examined it and then took and pulled the lanyard to fire the gun. The explosion of the charge was heard, but the bomb was not seen to leave the emplacement. Corporal Burchell rushed into the emplacement and saw that the bed of the gun had slipped and the bomb had hit the front of the emplacement and rolled back in. He warned the crew of what had happened, but before he could get clear himself, the bomb exploded, killing him instantly.*

The accident occurred in the vicinity of the ruined village of Thélus, south of Vimy-Ridge.

The son of Herbert Charles Burchell – Deputy Minister of Public Works and Chairman of the St. John's Municipal Council – and of Ellen Bertha Burchell (née *Gisbourne*) of Avalon House, Waterford Bridge Road, St. John's, Newfoundland – the couple later retired to Windsor, Nova Scotia - he was also older brother to Ernest Francis Burchell*.

**Ernest Francis Burchell also served with the 36th Overseas Battery and then in France with the 3rd Canadian Division Ammunition Column (Number 301237). He survived the war.*

At first documented as having been *killed in action* on December 27 of 1916, a later report from the 3rd CDAC submitted on or about February 13, 1917, resulted in Corporal Burchell's file being amended so as to read *accidentally killed*.

Frederic Charles Burchell had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and six months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, March 17, 1893.

Corporal Frederic Charles Burchell 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 25, 2023.