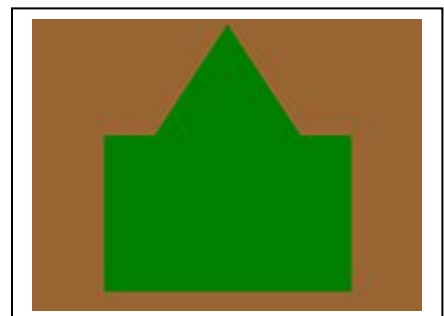




Corporal John Colford (Number 646159) of the 47th Battalion (British Columbia), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Roelincourt Military Cemetery: Grave reference VI.C.25..

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 47th Battalion (British Columbia) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is from the Military Wiki web-site.)

(continued)



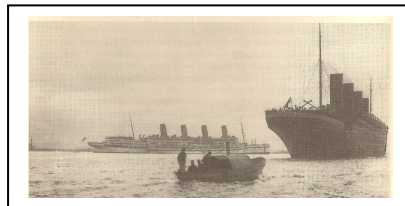
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *bridge carpenter*, John Colford has left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of British Columbia. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was staying at the *City Hotel* in the city of Vancouver for a part of the month of May, 1916, for Vancouver was where and when he enlisted.

May 10 of 1916 was to be a busy day for John Colford. On that date he underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. At the same time he also enlisted, attested, and, according to his first pay records – which show this to be the first day on which he was remunerated for his services to the Canadian Army – was thereupon *taken on strength* by the 158th Battalion (*Duke of Connaught's Own*).

The formalities of his enlistment were then brought to a conclusion by the commanding officer of the 158th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Milne, when he declared – on paper – that...*John Colford...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

There appears to be little information available as to the activities of the 158th Battalion during the summer and autumn of 1916 after John Colford's enlistment. The unit was based in Vancouver and the Beatty Street Armoury – and also the nearby Cambie Street Grounds – are associated with the British Columbia Regiment (of which the 158th was an component) but the extent to which these facilities were employed by Private Colford and his Battalion is unclear.

It was on November 13, some six months after his enlistment, that the 158th Battalion – after a trans-continental train ride from Vancouver to Halifax – embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister ship to the ill-starred *Titanic* and to *Britannic* which, eight days later, on November 21, was to sink, having struck a mine, in the eastern Mediterranean.



(Right above: *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*)

Private Colford was not to travel alone for the crossing. Apart from his 158th Battalion, also taking passage to the United Kingdom were the 147th, 173rd, 180th, 194th and 222nd Battalions of the Canadian Infantry, as well as the 9th Draft of the Divisional Signal Company. The vessel sailed on November 14.

Olympic docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on November 20-21 from where it appears that the 158th Battalion was transported by train to the Army Camp at Shoreham-on-Sea in the English county of West Sussex. Private Colford was to remain there for just five weeks.

(continued)

On December 28 of 1916, Private Colford was transferred – on paper – to the 47th Battalion which was already serving on the Continent by that time. The *First Battle of the Somme* had just drawn to a close and re-enforcements were needed to fill the ranks of the depleted formations which had incurred horrendous casualties. The 158th was now to serve as a re-enforcement pool rather than as a fighting battalion*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to despatch overseas two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

Such was to be the case with the 158th Battalion: its personnel was eventually to be transferred to other battalions in the field, and definitively absorbed by the 1st Reserve Battalion on January 6, 1917, and officially disbanded later that same year.

Private Colford's re-enforcement draft likely took ship in the south-coast port of Southampton for the crossing to France. If so, he would have disembarked in the industrial port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. His personal file shows that on December 29 he reported to the Canadian Base Depot, by that time established in the vicinity of Le Havre, there to be temporarily *taken on strength*.



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

On only his third day at Le Havre, Private Colford was admitted into hospital* where he was diagnosed as suffering from tonsillitis. After four days of treatment he was released back to the Base Depot where he remained for another month.

**While one record in his personal dossier cites that for six days he was in the 7th Canadian Stationary Hospital at Le Havre, a second paper documents that he was there for only a day before being forwarded to the 39th General Hospital at Le Havre.*

And, in fact, according to its War Diary, the 7th Canadian Stationary Hospital was not in Le Havre but in nearby Harfleur.

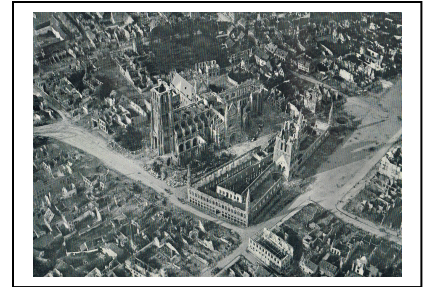
On February 6, 1917, Private Colford was despatched to report to the 47th Battalion in the field. This he did three days later, at a time when the unit was serving in the forward area in the vicinity of Carency. An excerpt from the Battalion's War Diary entry of February 9 reads as follows: *...Re-inforcements 75 O.R. partly trained and 37 O.R. trained and 1 Officer...reported for duty.*

* * * * *

The 47th Battalion (*British Columbia*) was a component of the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 4th Canadian Division, and it was as a unit of that 4th Canadian Division that the Battalion had landed in France in August of 1916, some six months prior to Private Colford's arrival. The 4th Canadian Division was the last such formation to arrive on the Continent, having been preceded by three others.

**There was also to be a Canadian 5th Division but, once having been formed, it remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of the Great War.*

From the time of the arrival of the (1st) Canadian Division* on the Continent in February of 1915, *it* and the succeeding Divisions had spent much of their time on the *Western Front* and in the *Ypres Salient** - the latter one of the most lethal theatres of the entire *Great War* - and also in that part of the front leading southwards from there to the Franco-Belgian frontier area.



By the summer of 1916 there were to be four Canadian Divisions serving there, a fourfold increase on the numbers which had fought in the 2nd Battle of Ypres in April of the previous year.

**The 1st Canadian Division – until the arrival of the 2nd Division it had logically been designated as simply the Canadian Division – had also served on two occasions in northern France, from February to April of 1915 in the Fleurbaix Sector, and also in May and June of the same year, during the confrontations at Festuberg and Givenchy.*

(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was to be little left standing. – from Illustration*)

By the end of the month of August, the majority of the elements of the Canadian 4th Division had landed on the Continent. They also were despatched to the *Kingdom of Belgium*, there to learn their trade*, being used in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division in and about the area to the south-west of Ypres.

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

(Preceding page: 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)

This co-operative arrangement did not last long. The British High Command was about to call on the Canadians to supply troops to replace those who had fallen in battle on fields one-hundred kilometres to the south. By the end of September, most of the Canadian troops remaining in Belgium were those of the 4th Division: the other three Divisions had departed.

As much as a month earlier, by the end of August, a number of units of the 1st and 2nd Divisions had *already* been ordered on their way southwards. The 47th Battalion, soon to be undergoing intense preparatory training, was in its turn, and in little more than a month's time, on October 3, also to be making that journey to *the Somme*.

By the beginning of that October, 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.

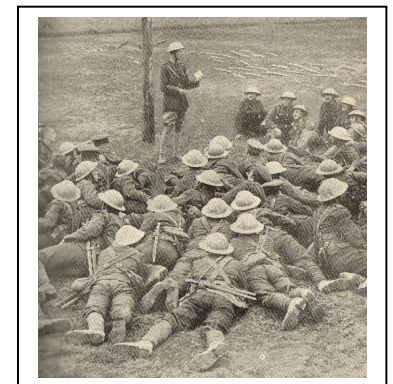
On first day of *1st Somme* all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment 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 Courcellette – 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 or about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

The first major collective contribution of the newly-arrived Canadians was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette, a confrontation which was to have occurred five weeks before the arrival of the 47th Battalion on the scene.



(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-Courcellette (see below), September 1916. – from *The War Illustrated*)

By the beginning of October the 47th Battalion was preparing for its move to *the Somme*. To that end, at mid-day of October 3, the unit began a four-and-a-half-hour march to the railway station at St-Omer.

There it boarded a train which was to leave at half-past five on that afternoon, and to arrive twelve hours later in the town of Doullens. An hour-long wait was then followed by an hour-long march which eventually saw the unit in its billets at seven-thirty on the morning of October 4.

(Right: *Almost a century after the 47th Battalion passed through it on the way to the 1st Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation* – photograph from 2015)



(Right below: *The small, country town of Doullens at or about the time of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

The remainder of the transfer to the area of *the Somme* was now to be made on foot. Stopping in places such as Hérissart and Warloy during a long and circuitous march, at half-past mid-day on October 8, 1916, the 47th... *Battalion arrives at BRICKFIELDS having marched via SENLIS and BOUZINCOURT and bivouacs on area allotted* (Excerpt from the 47th Battalion War Diary).



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

The 47th Battalion remained on the site at *Brickfields** for only two nights before the majority of its personnel was moved to nearby *Tara Hill Camp* for a further five days; this is not to say, however, that the officers and men of the unit were inactive. Apart from the day on which they moved camp, they supplied as many as four-hundred personnel per day to act as working-parties, not always a safe job, as several casualties were to testify.



**La Briqueterie (Brickfields), scene of a large British camp at the time, was in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.*

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

On October 16 there was a short tour in the trenches but at this time no reported infantry activity, the several casualties being due to enemy artillery fire.

Thereafter, life for the 47th Battalion reverted to the routine of the trenches that it had known in the *Ypres Salient* in August and September – although it was surely now even less pleasant than on that former occasion. This relative calm was to last for just under a month.



Excerpt from 47th Battalion War Diary entry of November 10: 7 P.M. Battalion leaves Brigade Reserve to occupy trenches for the purpose of carrying out a minor operation. It was scheduled for that night of November 10-11.

The *minor operation* in question was to be an attack on the *Regina Trench* system. This German strongpoint and defensive system had already resisted several attempts to take it, all but one of these previous efforts having been both costly and futile*. The Battalion War Diarist recorded the following:

...The attack which was made at 12 midnight was completely successful, its objective being captured and held in spite of heavy enemy barrage and machine gun fire, a considerable number of prisoners and two machine guns were captured...

Unfortunately he was also able to record forty-two killed in action, fourteen missing in action and one-hundred ten wounded.

(Right: *Regina Trench Cemetery* – *Regina Trench* was adjacent to another strong-point, *Kenora Trench* – and some of the ground on which the Canadian battalions fought in the autumn of 1916 – photograph from 2014)



**And, in fact, on the single successful occasion – also costly - the Germans had been able later to recapture the position. The strong-point was not to be definitively taken by the Canadians until on that November 10-11, some three weeks afterwards and as recounted above.*

(Right: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)



On November 15, those serving in the forward area were relieved – five wounded on that day – and returned to billets in the town. The reprieve lasted until November 18 when the Battalion was ordered back into the trenches – there were six killed and three wounded during the relief.

Withdrawn again just two days later, the unit was in reserve for the next five. Next it was forward again...for the last time.

The Battalion served in the area of Le Sars in the trenches as late as November 24, having its final incurred casualties of *the Somme* - of which two dead - on the previous day; thus the unit had apparently been little affected by the decision that *officially the First Battle of the Somme* was considered to be concluded on November 18 – other sources cite other dates.



(continued)

On that November 24 the unit was relieved – by another Canadian battalion - and withdrew from the field. On the next day again, the 58th Battalion began to march away from Albert and from *the Somme*.

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

The Canadian forces retired from *the Somme* – some were to be leaving the area before others even arrived – over a period of the two months of October and November. They left by a semi-circular route: at first in a westerly direction before then wheeling northward.

Passing to the west of the battered city of Arras and then beyond, the Canadians found themselves posted in sectors just to the north of the aforementioned Arras and south of the town of Béthune, roughly a thirty-kilometre front running north to south, and comprising most of the coal-mining area of northern France.



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

The important coal-mining region into which most of the Canadian Corps had by now been withdrawn after having served at *the Somme* – the thirty kilometres of sectors, from Arras in the south to Béthune in the north – was now to become an area of Canadian responsibility until October of the following year, 1917.



(Right: *The northern French town of Béthune, the original photograph likely taken towards the end of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Winters on the *Western Front* during the *Great War* tended to be rather dormant affairs, there being little concerted infantry activity except on a local level. There was the inevitable patrolling and the in-favour raiding – the 47th was involved in a number*. The raid was a favourite of the British High Command which felt it was good for morale – although those whose were unfortunate enough to be ordered to undertake these actions apparently were often not in agreement.

Most casualties during these winter months were inflicted by the enemy artillery – at times particularly active - and his snipers, although it apparently was the *sick parades* and particularly the dentistry problems that kept the medical facilities the most active.

**On two occasions incurring at least fifty casualties.*

Most of the Battalion War Diaries – including that of the 47th - during this period of December to March of the following spring, for days in a row, even with the unit in question posted to the front area, report things as *quiet*.

(continued)

But the 47th Battalion's Diarist did find time to remark upon, as has already been noted on a prior page, the arrival of a single officer and one-hundred twelve *other ranks* who arrived to *duty* from the Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre of February 9. Private Colford had reported to his new unit.

* * * * *

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



During the month of March many of the Canadian Battalions had spent much of their time in intensive training.

Among these exercises were to be some novel 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.

The 47th Battalion, on the other hand, had spent much of that month of March in the trenches at the front and it was not until the April 2 entry of the War Diary noted... *Rest and preparation for training*. Apparently on April 6 there was held a Sports Day.

On the early morning of 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.

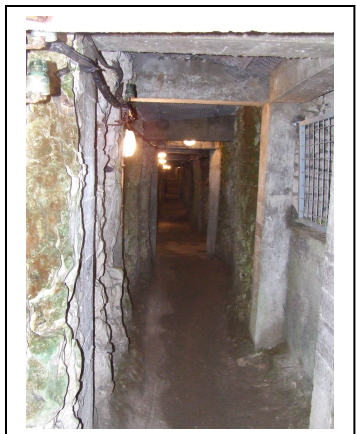
In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



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

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

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity under Canadian command, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants. The 3rd and 4th Divisions attacked *the Ridge* itself, the 1st and 2nd were to deal with other objectives on the right-hand, and southerly, slope of the summit.



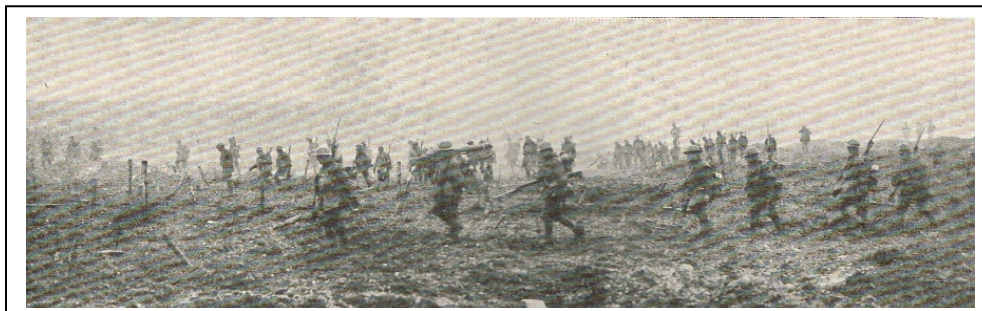
(Preceding page: *Grange Tunnel, one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later* – photograph from 2008(?))

The 47th Battalion appears not to have taken a leading role during the operation at *Vimy Ridge*. The Canadian 10th Infantry Brigade of which the 47th Battalion was a unit, had been issued orders to capture a promontory known as...*the PIMPLE*.

Originally an objective of the first day, April 9, the attack on the PIMPLE was of necessity postponed due to problems in the area of nearby *Hill 145* – on the summit of which the *Vimy Memorial* stands today.

Even when the assault went in successfully on the following day the 47th Battalion was to serve *in support* and was called forward only during the evening of April 10 to relieve the 44th Battalion.

(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*)



There had been, on those first two days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous days' successes had proved logistically impossible.

The Canadians were obliged to content themselves with consolidating the newly-captured positions and with awaiting the anticipated counter-attacks which, in fact, never really amounted to very much.

By April 11, the Germans, although having withdrawn some three kilometres, were busy sealing any possible breach and constructing new defences. The conflict was thus once more to revert to one of inertia.

(Right: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)



The official conclusion of the *Battle of Arras* is recorded as May 16, 1917, but well before that date the offensive had lost the momentum of the first few days. British interest was already turning northwards to Belgium and the *Ypres Salient*, and to a summer offensive that was to become one of the most murderous of the entire *Great War: Passchendaele*.

(continued)

May 16, apart from heralding the end of *First Arras*, was the first day of twelve that were perhaps as pleasant for Private Colford's unit as it ever was to become on the *Western Front*: the 47th Battalion remained behind the lines training but also indulging in sports, parades, inspection and – for some personnel – leave granted, often back to the United Kingdom: although not for Private Colford, *that would come later*.

It was not until the night of May 28-29 that the unit returned to the forward area, the march into position being noted in the War Diary as having been one of... *very little activity*. Two hours later all that changed as a heavy German artillery barrage welcomed the newcomers to the front.

Not many casualties appear to have resulted from the shelling of that night but during the following days, until June 4 when the 47th Battalion in turn was relieved, a further thirty-three were counted.



(Right: *Canadian troops under artillery fire in the area of Lens at some time during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

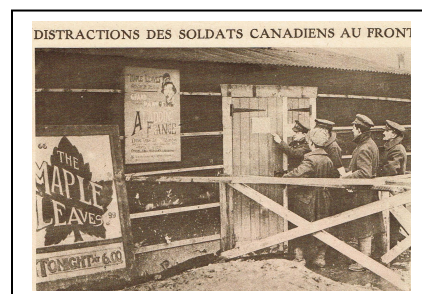
It was not to be until the night of June 19-20 that the Battalion made its way forward again to relieve the 78th Battalion. And if no-one else was too happy about the change of venue, at least the Battalion Headquarters Staff appeared to be, as the War Diarist saw fit to report... *the dugouts are very deep and by far the best we have been in*. How those other than the Headquarters Staff were faring was not recorded.

On the final day of this six-day tour in the area of Givenchy (*Givenchy-en-Gohelle*), on June 25, a *minor offensive operation* was undertaken by the 47th Battalion against German positions: *Objectives; Canada, Toronto and La Coulotte trenches as far south as La Coulotte Road*. Five killed in action and fifteen wounded – then the Battalion was relieved and retired to *St. Lawrence Camp*.



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

The next six-week period was to be a succession of posting into the rear areas for Private Colford and the 47th Battalion: *St. Lawrence Camp; Chateau de la Haie; Verdrel; Blue Bull Tunnel* (sorry, but cannot find any details); *Niagara Camp*; and *Zouave Valley* where they played baseball – not that it hadn't been played everywhere else.



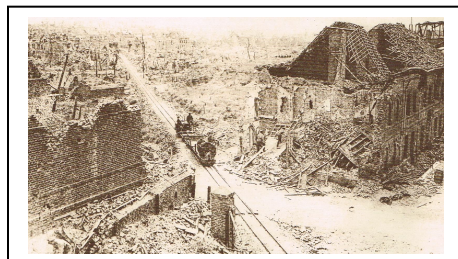
(Right: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)

The Battalion had relieved the 75th Battalion on the night of August 17-18 in the front-line trenches and for the first number of days the only apparent hostility was to be shown by the artillery of both sides. However, early on the morning of August 22 the Battalion attacked the enemy positions along the Lens-Arras road.

(Right below: *The city and mining-centre of Lens in a calm period towards the end of the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

The fighting included assaults on enemy strong-points and there was house-to-house fighting all day, much of it, according to the War Diarist, of a hand-to-hand nature...and 100 of the enemy were accounted for, including 7 unwounded prisoners; the situation made it unwise to take many prisoners... The night was marked by much artillery activity on both sides, also machine-gun fire. (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry of August 22, 1917)



The attack continued on the morrow and was to include a raid on a tunnel system. The Canadians made gains earlier on but the Germans counter-attacked and forced several Canadian withdrawals before the situation stabilized when further enemy thrusts – six in all says the Diarist – were all repulsed.

The two days following were relatively quiet, consolidation of positions, replenishing ammunition and other stores, and the evacuation of wounded being the priorities - apart from the ever-present evasion of the shell-fire of the enemy guns.

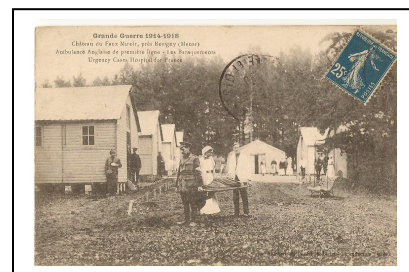
During the night of August 25-26 (despite the fact that the War Diarist has 24-25) the 47th Battalion was relieved. Wagons met the unit behind the lines at Souchez and transported it to the rear, back to *Niagara Camp*.

It was not until that time at *Niagara Camp* that there was to be the opportunity to count, all told, the cost of those seven days in the trenches: fifty-five *killed in action*, one-hundred seventy-seven *wounded*, sixteen *wounded - remained on duty*, three *missing in action*.



(Right: *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*)

One of the wounded, although by the standards of the *Great War* it was a minor incident, had been Private Colford who had been evacuated to the 13th Canadian Field Ambulance on August 23. A gas-shell had exploded nearby and he had been feeling the effects of it – although exactly which gas it was appears not to have been documented. His discomfort had fortunately not been long-lasting and he had returned to his unit on August 25, two days afterwards.



(continued)

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

The Canadians apparently had expected, and had planned, further action in the area of Béthune-Arras, but to the north the ongoing *Third Battle of Ypres* was not proceeding according to expectations and the British were running out of re-enforcements. The Canadians – and the Anzacs* - were to be ordered to provide the necessary man-power.

**Australian and New Zealand Army Corps*

There were to pass, however, a further six weeks before the 47th Battalion was to be called into Belgium, a period of routine service when in the forward and support areas with little infantry action, and days of drill and training while withdrawn to the rear - twenty-eight of the forty-one days of September and early October were spent away from the front.

On September 25 Private Colford's Battalion had concluded a day of instruction with one of those all-too-infrequent baths. And Private Colford himself had ended the day with a first stripe to sew on his sleeve, having received promotion to the rank of lance corporal.

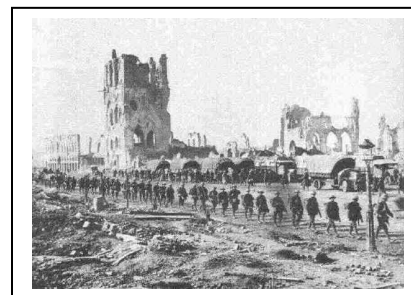
Although there appears to have been a railway line which passes close to the northern French commune of Isberques, on October 13 the 47th Battalion was instead to undertake a nine-hour route march to get there from its former quarters at Verdrel to the south. It was to train there in the area of *Pevion Farm* for the following week.

Then on October 21 the unit marched to the Cassel Road, there to board busses which were to transport the personnel into Belgium, across the remnants of Ypres, to deposit their passengers at the camp at Potijze to the north-east of the city.



The Germans welcomed Lance Corporal Colford and his comrades-in-arms as they crossed Ypres, a heavy shell explosion killing two and wounding twenty.

(Right above: *British troops being transported during the early days of the Great War by requisitioned London busses: Whether those carrying Lance Corporal Colford were any more comfortable is not known. – from Illustration*)



By the end of the following day, October 22, the Battalion's four under-strength Companies* had moved into the support line where the combined efforts of the British-Canadian and the German artillery ensured that they were to enjoy an agitated night.

**Apparently each of them comprised only one-hundred fifty personnel rather than the regulation two-hundred fifty.*

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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*)

The 47th Battalion was now to play its part in the ongoing offensive in Belgium, and once again the Canadians were to serve in the *Ypres Salient* where they had fought in 1915 and 1916. Now they were to toil in a battle that has come to symbolize the wretchedness of war.

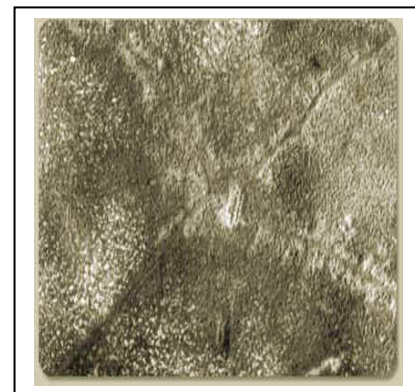


(Right above: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign 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.



From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. During 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. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



(Right above: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

On the morrow it rained and the Battalion remained where it was. On the next there was extremely heavy enemy shelling and the day was spent burying the dead which littered the battle-field. As might be expected, casualties were incurred while this morose activity was being undertaken: two wounded and two fatalities.

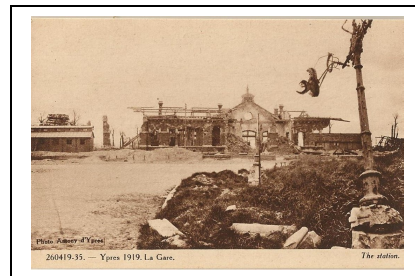
On the following day yet again, October 25, the Battalion was moved up into the close support area. A planned offensive was to go in on the following morning.

As the first attacking troops moved forward on that morning of October 26, those in support – such as the 47th Battalion – moved up in turn to take the places just vacated. The fighting, as ever, was ferocious at times, and enemy counter-attacks – as on that afternoon - often threw the Canadian attackers back whence they had come. However, as the day advanced, so did the attackers, and a new front line was established.

(continued)

On the following morning the 47th Battalion in conjunction with the 44th was ordered...to advance & occupy the ridge in front & and throw out posts...This operation was accomplished successfully. (Excerpt from 47th Battalion War Diary entry for October 27, 1917)

These new positions, despite the attentions of the German guns, had all been consolidated by the early hours of the next day and on that evening of October 28 the Battalion was relieved and was withdrawn to Potijze. By the end of the following day again it had boarded a train in Ypres and had retired well to the west, to *Burns' Camp* at Brandhoek, there to stay until the first day of November.



(Right above: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

On November 1, by train and by route march, the 47th returned to Potijze where it remained for the next five days to supply working-parties and carrying parties for the myriad tasks at hand. However, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions by now having taken over responsibility at the front, Lance Corporal Colford's unit was not called upon to serve in the forward area and, in fact, on November 6, it began to retire from the *Ypres Salient* and back into France.



(Right above: *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*)

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



There were no busses on this occasion to carry the troops away from Potijze but after a three-hour route march the unit found itself in the rear area to the west of Ypres, in the area of the community of Vlamertingue.

On the morrow the 47th Battalion marched once more – in the direction whence it had arrived only twenty-four hours previously and back to Ypres. But it was only to the railway station and, at two o'clock in the afternoon, the unit was alighting in the French community of Cæstre before then marching for a further hour, to Hondegheem, where it still was to be found on the tenth day of the month.

That November 10 was the day on which Lance Corporal Colford was admitted into the 13th Canadian Field Ambulance (perhaps at Cæstre) – and reportedly forwarded to the 12th CFA (in the area of Merville) on the same day – for medial attention to a case of myalgia. After nine days of treatment, on November 19 he returned to his unit, it by that time in the vicinity of the larger centre of Hazebrouck.

In a sense, Lance Corporal Colford had been fortunate in contracting his myalgia at this time: during his absence the Battalion had been ordered back to the area of Ypres and to Potijze where it had once more supplied working-parties – and incurred a total of nineteen casualties – before having been withdrawn to the rear on November 17 and thence to Hazebrouck two days later, on the day of Lance Corporal Colford's return.

However, hardly had he reported back *to duty* than Lance Corporal Colford was on his way once more. On this occasion he had been granted two weeks leave and although it is not documented, it is not unlikely – since there appears to have been an extra day allocated, presumably for travel – that this time was spent in the United Kingdom.



Lance Corporal Colbert was reported as back with his unit on December 6.

(Right above: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The month of December offered something a little different – and a reminder of home - to all the Canadian military formations and units which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 1 until 17, and participation, in at least *some* units, was to be 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 pay for it as well.*

It is not sure, however, whether Lance Corporal Colford was able to exercise his right to vote since the Battalion War Diary records that the Battalion personnel had done so on December 5 – just after lectures given by the Medical Officer on *Care for Feet and Trench Foot* - on the day before his return.

In any case, he returned to a Battalion which had been withdrawn well behind the forward area and, although it was to change venue – from Houdain to Château de la Haie to Neuville St-Vaast – was to be engaged in training and sports until December 29 when it was ordered back into the support line via the Lens-Arras Road into the *Avion Sector*.

The winter of 1917-1918 was for the most part to be a quiet period, much as had been the three previous winters of the *Great War*. The 47th Battalion War Diary suggests that there was little offensive activity on the part of the unit...and the number of casualties recorded per diem are few.

Certainly the weather was often the cause of difficulty, the rain and melting snow rendering the ground impassable: on January 15, for example it was complained that men were losing their gum-boots and had to move around bare-footed and...*in two other instances men were mired and had to be pulled out by means of working Parties and ropes.* (Excerpt from 47th Battalion War Diary entry of the day)

In early February Lance Corporal Colford was sent on a General NCOs' course at the 4th Divisional Wing at the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp at Étaples and was awarded his corporal's stripe on the day after he got there. The course lasted for three weeks and Corporal Colford returned *to duty* with his unit *in the field* – yet behind the lines – on February 24.

It appears that the 47th Battalion spent much of that winter, particularly from late January until March 21, training in areas away from the front lines. The unit changes locales on several occasions and were posted to places such as Souchez, Ablain-St-Nazaire and Vimy in the southern sectors and to Aix-Noulette, Houdain and Noeux-les-Mines further north.



(Right above: *The village of Souchez in 1915, even before the arrival of the British and Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)

It is doubtful if these places meant very much to the troops which passed through as each and every one of them, even though they were no longer in the forward area, was nothing more than another pile of rubble.



(Right above: *The church at Ablain-St-Nazaire, and even further behind the forward area than Souchez, also as it was by the summer of 1915 – from Le Miroir*)

On that March 21 the Battalion paraded to the top of *Vimy Ridge* from where they expected to have a view of a gas projectile attack on the enemy. The weather gods, however, had other ideas and it became too foggy for anything to be seen although the bombardment could apparently be heard.

Elsewhere, to the south, on that first day of spring, 1918, there were other ongoing bombardments as the Germans launched a massive offensive.

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 then launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

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

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens, the sector where the 85th Battalion was serving, in March of 1918, but 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 impressive German advance continued for a month, but petered 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.

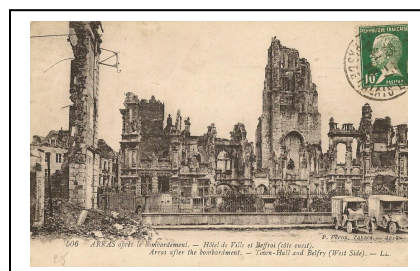
**A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but was finally held by the end of the month.*

(Right: British troops on the retreat in Belgian Flanders during 'Georgette' in mid-April of 1918 – from Illustration)



At first there had been a great deal of indecision displayed by the Canadian High Command and units were being transferred, often in a circular fashion, with orders given before soon afterwards being countermanded.

The *supposed* object of these exercises had been two-fold: to relieve and release British troops to fight further south; and to secure the area of Arras which appeared to be – and which later *proved* to be – the northern limit of the German offensive. However, it also produced a great deal of unnecessary confusion.



(Right above: The City Hall of Arras and its venerable bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four full years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card)

The 47th Battalion, having returned from *Vimy Ridge*, in the days that followed continued to supply working-parties and carrying-parties, continued to train and drill and even assisted in the construction of a light-railway line. And then the unit began a tour as reserve in the forward area near to *Hill 70*. In the Battalion War Diary there appears to be no inkling of the urgency of the situation on the front to the south until March 26.



(Right above: Canadian troops in the process of constructing a light railway 'somewhere in France' during the latter stages of the Great War – from Illustration)

Excerpts from 47th Battalion War entry for March 26, 1918: ...*The Battalion stood to from 3.00 AM to 9.00 AM ready to move on 15 minutes notice. No training was carried out during the day...all leave having been cancelled.* There is no further information offered a propos, and multiple working-parties laboured on into the night.

(continued)

Two days later the Battalion began to react to having received multiple orders: Having moved to Noeux-les-Mines on March 27, it now marched to Barlin and from there took a train south to Mont St-Éloi. There it learned about the massive German attack which had affected as far as Arras, adjacent to the area of Canadian responsibility. It was, of course, impossible to know or even to surmise the enemy's intentions, thus Canadian troops were being massed in the area for any eventuality.



(Right above and right: *The village of Mont St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partly destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



Thus the 47th Battalion, while remaining at Mont St-Éloi, was held in readiness throughout the night to move out on fifteen minutes' notice.

It appears that while several Canadian battalions at this time were despatched southward and south-westward to counter any German incursion into the vicinity of Arras, the 47th Battalion, for a certain number of days still held at fifteen minutes' readiness, remained in close proximity to Mont St-Éloi. Things were stabilizing although the enemy's artillery were still active, keeping the British High Command guessing his intentions, and raids were undertaken by both sides as a matter of course.

Things were gradually reverting to the routines of trench warfare.

The attack in the north of the country and in Belgium also caused anxiety and several moments of crisis. After a German advance of several days, and as had happened in the south, a good deal of territory had been conceded to the enemy but nothing of any great military importance had been lost; in both cases the enemy was beginning to be held and he was now becoming overextended.

Thus the 47th Battalion remained in the sectors to the north of Arras, close to Gavrelle, Fresnes and Point du Jour where there were a number of minor – yet fierce - confrontations during the month of April.



The War Diary also remarks upon the increased activities of aircraft of both side during this period and a number of casualties were by now being attributed to those of the enemy.

(Right above: *Point-Du-Jour Military Cemetery, Athies, wherein are buried some eight-hundred dead of the Great War, of which fewer than half have been identified – photograph from 2010(?)*)

(continued)

The southern extreme of *Vimy Ridge* becomes a gentle slope which descends towards Arras, some five kilometres distant. About half-way towards that city is the village of Roclincourt in which area the 47th Battalion was serving at the end of April of 1918 – it was at least close enough for the personnel to go there for a bath on the 27th day of that month.

Not a great deal is recorded as having transpired on the 47th Battalion's front on April 30: the Canadian artillery was busy; no aircraft from either side were operational because of poor visibility; and little enemy infantry activity was to be perceived for the same reason. Three patrols were eventually sent out during the evening and they returned after midnight, reporting very little and having incurred no casualties.

In fact, the 47th Battalion War Diary reported only a single *other rank* wounded on that date – and the same is true for the entry of the next day, May 1.

And yet, his personal dossier, a government casualty report, other documents – and of course, his headstone - all record Corporal Colford as having been *killed in action* on April 30, 1918.

The son of Andrew Colford of 2, Summer Street, St. John's Newfoundland, he had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-nine years and two months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland (from attestation papers), March 31, 1887.

Corporal John Colford 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.

