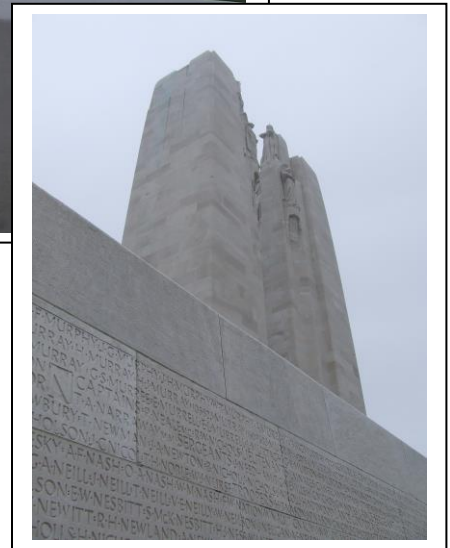




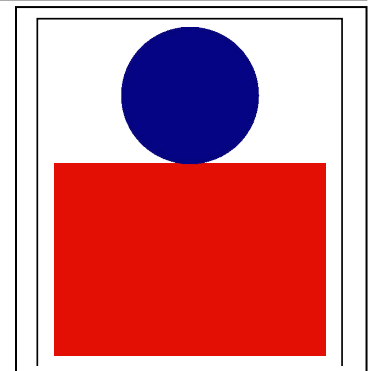
222501 J. COLLINS



Private Joseph Collins (Number 222501) of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, Joseph Collins has left behind him little, if any, information pertaining to his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The only thing that appears to be certain is that he was present in the Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, community of North Sydney towards the end of August of 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted – according to his first medical report – on the penultimate day of the month.

It was then some five weeks later, on the 5th day of that October that Joseph Collins presented himself, now in the industrial city of Sydney, for attestation by the second-in-command of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) and was temporarily* posted to the Sydney Depot Company.

**It may have been as of that date although he may have been at the Sydney Depot during the period of August 30 until October 15 – except that are no Army pay records to suggest that he was serving during that time.*

It was ten days later again, on October 15, that pay records now show that he had been attached to 'D' Company of the 85th Battalion based in Halifax. He was, however, before he left Sydney on that same day, to undergo a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force.*

The formalities of Private Collins' enlistment were brought to a conclusion some three weeks later, on December 20, when the Commanding Officer of the 85th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Borden, declared – on paper - that...*Joseph Collins...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with correctness of this Attestation.*

The 85th Battalion had its headquarters in *the Armouries* at Halifax and it was in this vicinity that the unit began training as of October 14, 1915. While 'A' Company was to be quartered in the Armoury building itself, the other three Companies – and thus Private Collins – were to encamp on the adjacent Halifax Common for the next several months.

It was during this period, on April 15 of the following year, 1916, that Private Collins contracted a case of parotitis – inflammation of the parotid salivary glands: mumps – and was admitted into the Rockhead Hospital for contagious diseases. Nine days afterwards he was returned to his unit.

By that spring, the authorities had decided to create a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915, these four formations were assembled to train together at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service.*

On October 11 of 1916, the thirty-four officers and one thousand one *other ranks* of the 85th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. On that same day, the 185th and the 188th Battalions were also to march on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.



(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*)

On October 13th - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to file up the gangways before *the vessel* was to cast her lines and set her bow towards the open sea. One of the largest ships afloat at the time, for the trans-Atlantic passage, *Olympic* was carrying some six-thousand five-hundred military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18-19, six days later, and the troops disembarked on that second day, the 19th. The 85th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the English county of Surrey. There Private Collins was now to follow several more weeks of drill and training – and was to be fitted with a truss to consolidate a hernia with which he had been born.

By December of 1916 the last units of the Canadian Corps were withdrawing from the battlefields of *the Somme*. As it was with all the infantry battalions – of both sides – they had incurred horrendous losses and were in dire need of re-enforcements to fill their depleted ranks.

To that end, on December 5, Private Collins was transferred – on paper – from the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) to the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), a unit already serving on the Continent. On the night of that same December 5-6 he sailed for France, likely via the English south-coast port of Southampton to the French industrial city of Le Havre, located on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

By this time the Canadians had established a large Base Depot in the vicinity of Le Havre and it was to there that Private Collins reported on December 6, the day of his arrival from England. He was to remain at the Depot for only some twenty-four hours before being despatched from there, on December 7, to join his new unit in the field.

However, Private Collins' papers document that he did not report *to duty* with his unit until December 23, and on that date the 13th Battalion War Diary reports no re-enforcements arriving. Nor does it appear to make *specific* reference, after the one-hundred fifty *other ranks* which joined the unit on December 9, of any more during that month – although the suggestion is made that some others did*.

**Perhaps he arrived on that December 9. The other possibility is that Private Collins' was sent via one of the entrenching battalions which sometimes acted as stop-overs until the time was convenient for the new unit to receive its recruits. However, the entries in the War Diaries of the four entrenching units seem not to support this particular theory.*

* * * * *

The 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (1st) Canadian Division*. In mid-October of 1914 the Division had been the first force to arrive in the United Kingdom from Canada and then had been the first Canadian formation to set foot on French soil, which it had done in February of 1915.

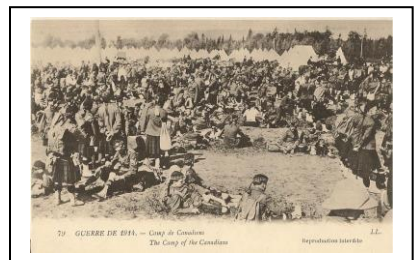
**Until the time that the 2nd Canadian Division was formed – and at times afterwards as well - it was referred to as simply the Canadian Division.*



(Right: *The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site*)

(Right below: *The caption reads merely ‘Camp of Canadians’ but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)

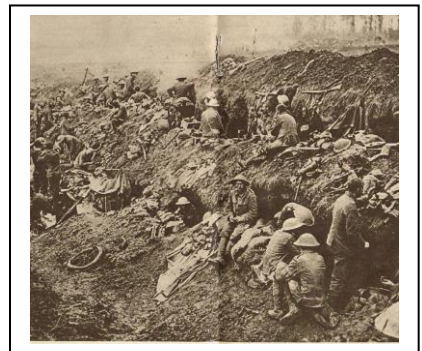
For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. There, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the situation had been relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13th Battalion had begun to fit into the rigours, the routines – and some of the perils - of life in the trenches*.



**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.

(Right: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration*)

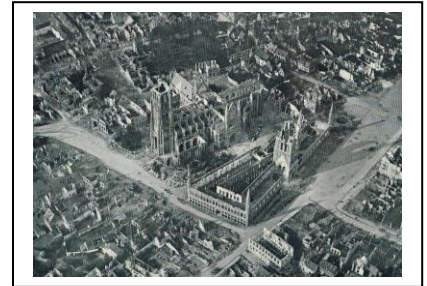


In mid-April the Division, having moved north into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, had eventually taken up positions in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*. And whereas the first weeks of the Canadian presence on the Continent had been relatively quiet, the dam was about to burst - although it was to be gas rather than water which, for a few days, would threaten to sweep all before it.

The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right below: *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 little left standing. – from Illustration*)

The *Second Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine had proved overwhelming.



(Right: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The cloud had first been noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left at first had wavered, then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered, particularly that of the 13th Battalion which had been obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat by the unit, not always very cohesive, had become necessary.



(Right above: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

By the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan had held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement was to become necessary. At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.

The 13th Battalion had been relieved on April 25 and had withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, it had remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it was to be withdrawn into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres. On May 3 the unit had been ordered to retire into northern France, to the area of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.



(Preceding page: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)

The information to be gleaned from the Battalion War Diary during the period of 2nd Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred was apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5th Brigade War Diary – but it was to be on April 28 that a re-enforcement draft of two-hundred seventy-six *other ranks* had reported to *duty* to the unit.

In mid-May the 13th Battalion had moved down the line to the south, over the Franco-Belgian frontier, and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks would take place in which the British High Command were to manage to gain some three kilometres of ground but also would contrive to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left by then of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not possessing the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless would be dealt with harshly.

The role of the 13th Battalion had been to relieve the 16th Canadian Battalion after its attack planned for May 20 on a German-held position, and had then been to consolidate and to defend that same position. Despite heavy losses the 16th had captured its objective, positions which then the 13th Battalion had occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men were to fight and repel a strong German counter-attack before then having been relieved on the following day again.



The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, were to fare hardly better than the British. Each contingent – a Division - would incur over two-thousand casualties before the offensive had drawn to a close.

The French effort – using the same primitive tactics - was likewise to be a failure, but it was to be on an even larger scale: it would cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

**The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right above: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle to those who fell. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

(continued)

On May 22 the 13th Battalion had marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. The reprieve was to last for two weeks, until June 5, when it had been ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert.

Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and incurring many of its casualties, although fewer, due to having repeated the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert – by June 24 the 13th Battalion had been retired from the area. At about the same time, over a number of days, so it had been with the entire Canadian Division.

**Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 13th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then in Steenwerck, all three of these communities in the vicinity of Bailleul. From there it was to move eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of the town of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 13th Battalion had remained – as had the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it was to come to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

It was to be another eleven months before the 13th Battalion would be involved in any further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were to be fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers would ensure a constant flow of casualties.

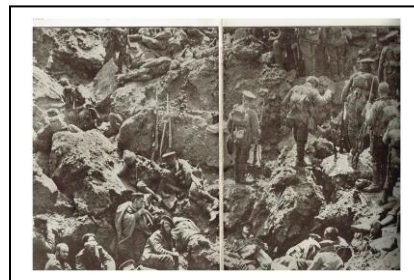
In September of 1915 it had been the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the *Kingdom of Belgium*. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent and to the north of the one held by the 13th Battalion and the other units of the now-designated 1st Canadian Division.

This area was several kilometres south of the city of Ypres and it had been there, after some seven months of life in and about the trenches, that the 2nd Division was about to fight its first major action of the *Great War**.

(continued)

For the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April were not to be as tranquil as those being experienced during the same period by the battalions of the 1st Division.

**The Action at the 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 excavated a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. This was followed immediately by an infantry assault.*



(Right above: A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration)

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2nd Division affair and the personnel of the 13th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery.

In late March and April of 1916 the Canadian 1st Division had been transferred from the *Ploegsteert Sector* to that area of *the Salient* comprising the southern outskirts of Ypres. It was still adjacent to the Canadian 2nd Division, but now to its left-hand and northern flank. And the 3rd Canadian Division – having officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916 – had recently taken over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of *the Ypres Salient*.

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* had been fought out 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 had delivered an offensive which was to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they had 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 British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had 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 to be a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to be delivered – those that did had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to pieces - the enemy had 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*)



The events of that June 2 had interrupted what had already been a busy day for the 13th Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports in the afternoon.

Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3rd Division sector, orders had been given... *for the Battalion to 'stand to' and be ready to move at a moment notice... Soon after this the Battalion was ordered to proceed to the support of the Canadian 14th Battalion and made a forced march... to Zillebeke Etang...* (Excerpt from 13th Battalion War Diary)

The 13th Battalion was not to be involved in the disastrous counter-offensives made by Canadian troops on June 3 and had been, in fact, engaged in only defensive activities. Even so, the casualty count for the days of June 2 and 3 had numbered forty-four.

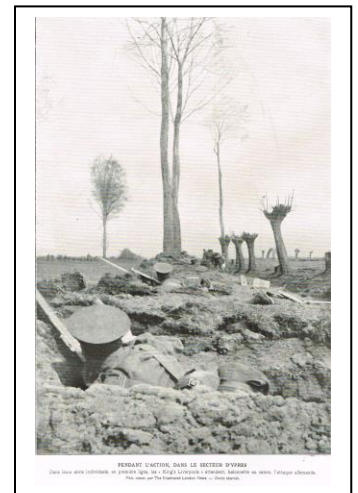


(Right: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014*)

On June 4 there had been no concerted action by the Canadians; the 13th Battalion had spent much of its time consolidating positions and sending out reconnaissance parties, all the time receiving the attention of the German artillery. Casualties for June 4 had amounted to a total of forty-eight.

The War Diarist's entry for the 5th reports no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion on that day. There were to be reported, nonetheless, thirty *killed, wounded or missing in action.*

On June 6 the War Diarist once again reports little activity in the area of the 13th Battalion. Nor does he report – but, then, why should he? – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at *Hooge village.*



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration)*

At Hooge the Germans had then managed to gain some territory before their advance was contained. The 13th Battalion was to suffer half-a-dozen casualties on that day.

Late on the night of the 7th, following an uneventful day – by the standards of the time – and with no casualties due to enemy activity, the Battalion had been withdrawn to the south-west of Ypres to arrive in its billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8th.

There the unit had remained until the evening of June 11 when had it begun a march which was to bring the 13th Battalion back to the area of *Mount Sorrel*. There it was to serve in the now-imminent – and ultimately final - assault.

By midnight of that June 12-13, some twenty-eight hours after beginning its return march, the 13th Battalion would be in its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry for June 12-13) *At 1. 30 a.m. immediately our artillery lifted to the old British trenches, our men, the first and second line under Major K.M. Perry, the third and fourth under Major G.E. McCuaig sprang up on the parapet and set off at a steady pace, over very rough ground and through a heavy barrage and succeeded in gaining the first objective...*

As soon as the bombardment of the old British lines lifted at 1.50 a.m. the party again advanced at this stage the going was very heavy...

The attack proceeded briskly, bombing the enemy down the trenches, and directly the final objective was reached, Major McCuaig sent up a red flare...

The affair was to be over by mid-morning, the remainder of the day to be spent in consolidation, in taking care of the wounded of both sides and of prisoners... and in the burial of the dead. The 13th Battalion had retired later that night.

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 until the 13th – had thus culminated with this second and more successful - having been better prepared and also supported by a confident artillery programme - counter-attack by the Canadians on June 13. It was the final offensive of the confrontation, a military *quid pro quo* which was to leave both sides in approximately the same positions which they had been occupying on June 2 when the affair had started.



(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 – and then of 1917 - in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and of Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)*

(continued)

For the two months which had succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things had reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was to be no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity having been limited to raids and patrols. However, this was not to preclude a lengthy casualty list at times*.

**For example, during the tour in the front lines of July 15 to 19 inclusive, the War Diarist noted fifty-seven killed, wounded and missing in action.*

During the month of August the Canadian battalions had gradually been withdrawn from the *Ypres Salient* and ordered to camps for training in what was termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 13th Battalion had been one of the first to retire, having left the forward area for Brigade Support on August 7, then three days later having moved further to the rear area to begin that period of training.

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, the 13th Battalion had moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer.

The unit had entrained there at seven o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres where it would arrive, some nine hours afterwards, at four o'clock in the afternoon.

From there it had been another eight kilometres – this time on foot – to the awaiting billets.

(Right: Almost a century after the 13th Battalion passed through it on the way to the First Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation. – photograph from 2015)



For the following four days the personnel of the Battalion had marched to the south-east, to end their trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1. They were to move into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(Right: The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?))



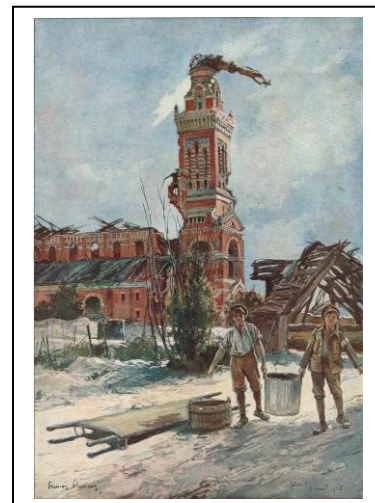
**La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

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

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

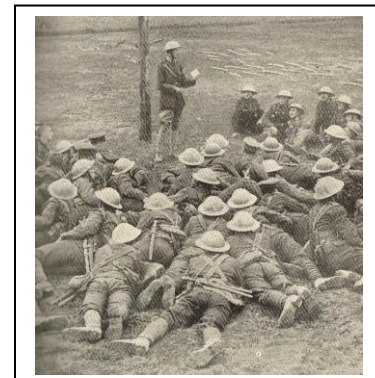
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland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

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 had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first *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 those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette (see below), September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)

However, there was to be on September 3, twelve days before that general attack by the British, an assault put in by the 13th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force at a place known as *Mouquet Farm*. Two Companies of the 13th Battalion (*Canadian Infantry*), Numbers 1 and 2, had been sent forward to assist in this operation at nine o'clock that morning.



The 13th Battalion War Diary for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially thus: *At 2.00p.m. No.3 Company... went forward and at 5.00 p.m. the remainder of the Battalion:-*

Headquarters – Pozieres Wood

Nos 1 and 2 Companies advanced and held the positions 73 to No. 1, 93 to No. 2 and consolidated.

No. 1 Company, Bombing the German Communication, and No. 2 Company, repelling a German Attack...

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

...During the whole of Sunday Night, the men were heavily shelled, but showed great courage and endurance (sic).



Sept 4th. ...The heavy shelling continued the whole of the day, on the Front and Support Lines, the Battalion also suffered a heavy Counter Attack. We managed however to connect up 55 and 59 and make a fair trench...

1916 5th Sept. ...The heavy shelling continued again on both sides, during the whole of the day, our Artillery was very active with guns of all Calibres, and fired over about two shells for every German one...

Maybe not a major affair in the eyes of certain authorities, the action at *Mouquet Farm* on September 3 and 4 was to cost the 13th Battalion a total of three-hundred twenty-three casualties.

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



The 13th Battalion had remained in the forward area until September 7, then had withdrawn to the town of Albert until the 9th when the unit had been ordered on a route-march in stages...to a Rest Area...in proximity to the community of Bonneville.

There at Bonneville for three days, it had then been ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)*. The unit had encamped there on the 18th, three days after the British general offensive of September 15.

It is not recorded how the officers and other ranks felt about this march to nowhere-in-particular and back, but the War Diarist of that time made the following entry: ...A halt was called for a short time at *Warloy*, and another longer halt was called for at a point not far from *Senlis*. These rests however were not appreciated much as it was too wet to sit down, the men were wet through and very weary, with standing with their heavy packs*, although they sang and whistled throughout the march. ...The only member of the Battalion that seemed to thoroughly enjoy the hill climbing expedition was the Regimental Goat Pet (the *Pipers Goat*).**

***Perhaps the officers and troops were wearing the kilts that they had worn until the beginning of September when they had been allowed to wear shorts if they wished; it must be remembered that a single kilt is made from fifteen yards of woollen cloth – heavy when dry: extremely heavy when wet.**

****Apparently they were accompanied on the march not only by the pipers' goat, but by the pipers themselves, the pipe band marching second only to the Headquarters Detachment.**

Only days later again, the 13th Battalion was to endure a further harsh experience of the *Somme*.

The 13th Battalion had taken over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, having relieved the 2nd Canadian Battalion near to the village of *Courcelette*. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit had remained there for only two days before having retired into support once more. It was then to be withdrawn into billets in Albert two days later again, on the 27th, and further back to *Warloy* on the morrow.



(Preceding page: Seen from the north, the village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 12017)

(Right below: After the fighting of Courcellette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir)

Warloy, within hours' marching distance of Albert, was where the Battalion was to be stationed for a week; during that time it had been involved in drills, parades, inspections, a bath for everyone in the unit, church, lectures, musketry and the replacement of worn equipment and clothing.



At the end of those seven days it had made the return march once more to Albert and then, on the 6th, had continued on to the camp at *Brickfields*.

The Battalion was now to be prepared for the upcoming offensive action to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps – in conjunction with the British 3rd Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the objective of the 13th Battalion was to be a German position designated as *Regina Trench*.

Unfortunately it appears that the appropriate page of the 13th Battalion War Diary a propos this operation, is missing. However, the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade offers some information, albeit less detailed, on the day's happenings.

The attack on the German positions had gone in on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8th.

(Right: Canadian Army Medical Corps personnel at work in a Regimental First Aid Post in the forward area – from Le Miroir)

The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War Diary:

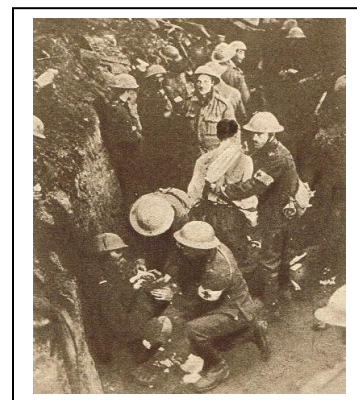
7.45 a.m. 13th Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.

9.15 a.m. Message... stating 13th Bn. stopped by German wire.

9.25 a.m. 13th Bn. report situation unchanged.

12.19 p.m. Message... ordering 13th Bn. to hold on to original position (jumping off line) and to try connect up in the evening with the left of the 16th Bn.

5.30 p.m. Message from 13th Bn. timed 2.25 pm. gives position of 13th Bn. Those who got into REGINA Trench were bombed towards the 16th Bn. Remainder were held up by barbed wire and were practically wiped out by M.G. fire.



(Preceding page: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on November 11, 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

6.00 p.m. 15th Bn. report at 3.45 p.m. that 13th Bn. called on 3 platoons of the reinforcing company of 15th Bn. and these are being replaced at dusk.

13th Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.

On October 9 the 13th Battalion held on in their former jumping off positions despite... heavy shelling for the greater part of the day... On the night of October 9-10 the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade retired... and the 13th Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.

The Battalion War Diarist would enter the figure of some three-hundred casualties* for the day of October 8 alone.

**On the entries of days following he also notes imprecise numbers of those originally reported as ‘missing’ who, by then were reporting to duty with the unit.*

(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 October 11 the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) had begun its march away from the *First Battle of the Somme*. Passing to the west then north – always on foot - by a circuitous route behind the city of Arras and then beyond, the unit had finally arrived in a sector further north up the line, this in the general area of the city and mining centre of Lens.



(Right above: The city of Arras was to endure four years of shelling during the Great War; the Grand’Place (Grande Place) looked like this by March, 1917, and more destruction was to follow. – from Le Miroir)



More precisely, the 13th Battalion had found itself relieving the 13th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment in trenches at Cabaret and Souchez. The date was October 27.

(Right above: 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)



The following weeks of autumn and the first ones of the winter were to be spent by personnel of the 13th Battalion in the same and also adjacent sectors. There the officers and men had once more settled into an existence in – and out of – the trenches.

And of course, it was on December 9 that Private Collins had taken his place among the unit's ranks.

(Preceding page: *A detachment of Canadian troops going to a forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

* * * * *

That late autumn of that 1916 – after the *First Battle of the Somme* - and the winter of 1916-1917 was also a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce* and to re-organize. There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.

There was of course, the constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers. However, it was mostly sickness and, particularly, dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period.

On March 4 the 13th Battalion began a two-day march from Ruitz – behind the lines – and, during the night of March 6-7, relieved the Canadian 20th Battalion in support positions near *Maison Blanche*, in the vicinity of the village of Neuville St-Vaast.

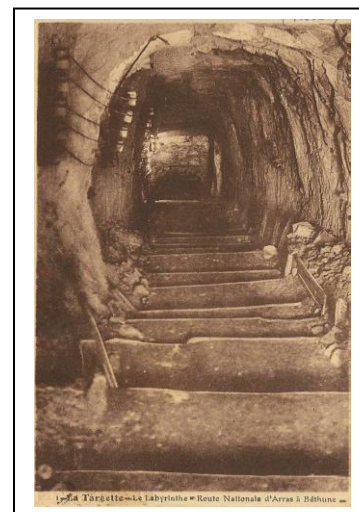
Six days later, on March 12, it was time for another battalion to move into those positions held by the 13th in *support*, and for the 13th to take over trenches in the front line.



(Right: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America.* – from *Le Miroir*)

During those days spent at *Maison Blanche*, the personnel of the 13th Battalion had apparently not been idle. It must have been apparent to all that there was something big afoot if the tasks allotted to – or witnessed by – Private Collins and also by his peers – and as noted in the War Diary - is evidence to go by:

March 9th ... Throughout the day there was a considerable amount of work to be done one way or another. Trench stores etc., had to be checked up, as also had the gas appliances and ammunition... A considerable amount of work had to be done in the way of cleaning up, and reconstructing the weak parts in the dugouts... The Battalion work parties... consisted of the following... working on Vase Tunnel... (another) pushing trucks for Tunnelling Company... cleaning Burn (a small stream)... burying cable from support to Front Line... The list is not exhaustive.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth – from a vintage post-card*)

The period in the front lines added other duties similar to those listed above: carrying parties, wiring parties, burial parties and observation of the fall of friendly artillery fire also became part of the routine. Six days later again, on the 18th, the unit retired once more into reserve in the area of Bois-les-Alleux and Mont St-Éloi, avoiding the main roads on the way.



The Battalion was to remain in this area until April 8 when it began to move forward in anticipation of the forthcoming attack.

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



Through the use of a system of by-then disused French trenches in the area, the Battalion was able to be assembled and to be ready five hours prior to *Zero Hour* and, in doing so, had incurred only two slight casualties.

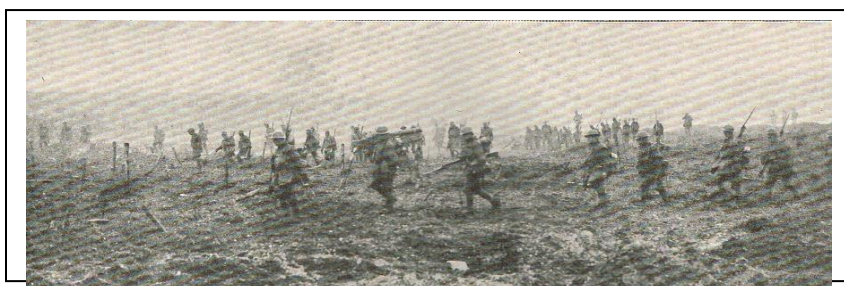
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation 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.



While the British campaign proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

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

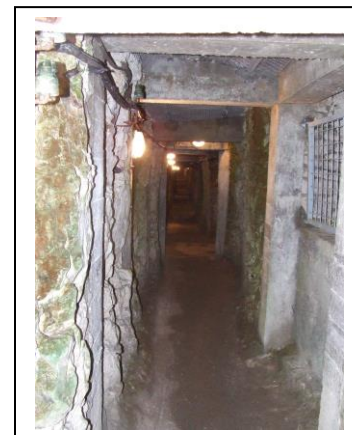
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there were even British troops serving under Canadian command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



(Preceding page: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)

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

The Battalion War Diarist described the 13th Battalion's role on April 9 thus: *During the Operations of April 9th the Battalion was in Brigade Support, so we were unable to report on many of the incidents which occurred ahead of the Battalion. We maintained communication between the attacking Battalions and Brigade during the whole of the operations, and were more or less a Report Centre. This was owing to the forward Battalions being unable to keep their wires intact.*



On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of *Vimy Ridge* of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in case of the anticipated German counter-attacks – which in fact never really amounted to much.

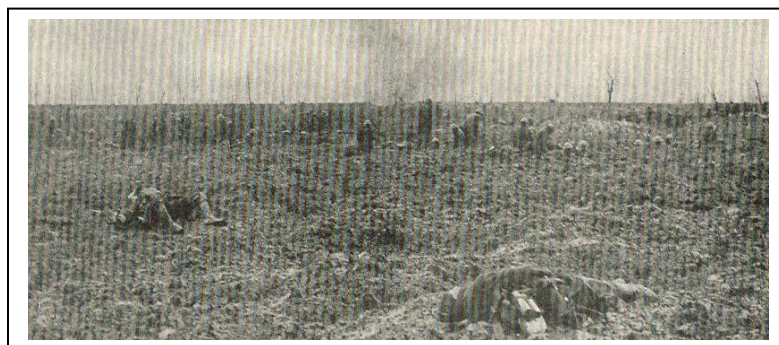
There had on that day been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



(Right: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)

On April 10...*the 13th Canadian Battalion continued with the work of consolidating...and extended on the left flank. Burying and Salvage Parties were detailed from each Company, and the clearing of the Battlefield practically completed. We also supplied several Working Parties during the day...These parties were used for road making to enable the Artillery to bring forward their guns... The weather was very bad the whole day... (Excerpts from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for April 10, 1917)*

On April 10 Private Collins was at first reported as *wounded* and then, later, as *wounded and missing*. There appears to be no further information available a propos.



(Right above: *The battle-field of Vimy Ridge on April 10, two unidentified fallen in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)

The son of Joseph Collins and of Martha Collins (Martha *Fuller* by the time of her son's enlistment) of Rose Blanche-La Poile, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Lizzie* to whom on October 1 of 1916 he had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay, and also to whom, on November 30, 1916, he had willed his all.

**Lizzie, born in La Poile, had already moved from Newfoundland to North Sydney, Cape Breton Nova Scotia, by the time she married Joseph Bradbury – originally from Bay Roberts, on December 26, 1911.*

Having been reported as wounded and missing on April 10, 1917, Private Collins was...*now* (as of January 5, 1918) *for official reasons, presumed to have Died on or since 10-4-17.*

Joseph Collins had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and four months: date of birth at Rose Blanche, Newfoundland, September 1, 1892.

Private Joseph Collins 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.