



Private James Conway, MM, (Number 877129\*) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Machine-Gun Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Wancourt British Cemetery: Grave reference VIII.G.4..

(Right: *The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps is from the [canadiansoldiers.com](http://canadiansoldiers.com) Web-site.*)

*\*Incorrectly recorded in some files as 1877129*

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of an *iron worker*, James Conway may have been the young man who sailed from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on board the SS *Kyle* on July 20, 1915. At *that* time describing himself as a *labourer*, he was on his way to the nearby industrial city of Sydney.

James Conway – whether it was he of the *Kyle* or not - apparently found work in Sydney, eventually residing at the corner of the Esplanade and Prince Street, for this is the address cited on his attestation papers. Having presented himself there in Sydney for medical examination, and found to be...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*...on March 7 of 1916, he also enlisted on that same day as both his medical file and his first pay records confirm. He then attested – *for the duration of the war* - on the morrow, March 8.

Those first pay records document that it was also on that March 7 that Private Conway was *taken on strength* by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*). Some seven weeks later, on April 26, the formalities of his enlistment were concluded when the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day, declared – on paper – that...*having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The unit, raised entirely in Cape Breton, at the outset had its training facilities in, and was also based in, the mining town of Broughton\* some twenty kilometres distant to the south of Sydney, which was almost certainly where Private Conway was despatched upon the Battalion's mobilization there during the first week of April if not before.

*\*Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end of the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

However, this posting to Broughton was not to last longer than just under two months: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* to comprise the 185<sup>th</sup>, the 85<sup>th</sup>, the 193<sup>rd</sup> and the 219<sup>th</sup> Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled\* to train together at *Camp Aldershot*, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then spent the entire summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

*\*The 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion apparently travelled by train to Camp Aldershot on May 26.*

That transfer began on October 11 of that same 1916. At seven o'clock in the evening, the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to embark onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister ship to *Britannic* – to be sunk in the Mediterranean a month later – and to the ill-starred *Titanic*. One hour later the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and men of Private Conway's Battalion had found their way on board.



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(Preceding page: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay at the Greek island of Lemnos in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

Private Conway's unit was not to traverse the Atlantic Ocean alone to the United Kingdom: as well as the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the 85<sup>th</sup>, the 188<sup>th</sup>, the 219<sup>th</sup>, the 193<sup>rd</sup> Battalions - and a part of the 166<sup>th</sup> - of the Canadian Infantry, as well as a number of other miscellaneous passengers, were to take passage, a total of some six-thousand military personnel. After three days of preparation, *Olympic* sailed from Halifax at eleven o'clock in the morning of October 13. Six days later, on October 18\*, and after an uneventful crossing - the vessel docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool.

*\*Other sites show October 19, although that may have been the day of the disembarkation.*

From dockside, the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion was transported southward to the Canadian military complex which had been established near the community of Witley in the southern extreme of the English county of Surrey.

It was to be almost seven weeks later, on December 6, 1916, that Private Conway once more disembarked having travelled overseas, although on this second occasion it had been the short crossing of the English Channel to the Continent. The draft to which he was attached had taken ship on December 5, likely in Southampton, and had sailed across to the French port-city of Le Havre in the vicinity of which was the Canadian General Base Depot at Rouelles.



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

At Le Havre, Private Conway reported *to duty* at the Base Depot on that December 6 and was thereupon *taken on strength* by the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), the parent unit having already been serving in both Belgium and France since August, some four months previous.

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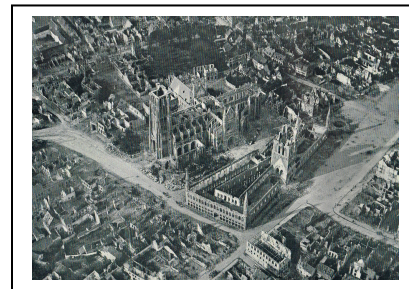
The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division. The Division had been transferred from England to the Continent in August of 1916, and had arrived, as Private Conway was to do, at Le Havre. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had subsequently spent two days at the nearby Canadian Infantry Base Depot before travelling northward on two trains.

Having passed through the larger French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, the unit had de-trained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe. The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had arrived in an area south-west of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*, and where the by-now veteran Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division was to aid, if only for a matter of days, in the formation of the new-comers.

(continued)

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

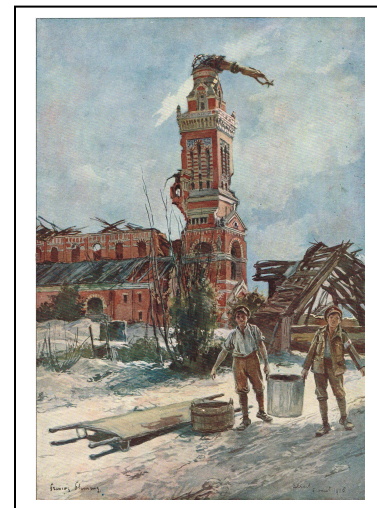
The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had subsequently – and briefly – experienced the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches of the *Western Front*. After a final tour in the forward area, it had been relieved on September 23<sup>rd</sup> and the unit's short experience of the *Ypres Salient* had thus concluded. The Battalion casualties for the month had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – extremely light for *the Salient*.



The troops which had arrived to take the place of the Canadians on that day had been Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting in the first battle to be called by that name.

After several days of changing billets, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations in the cauldron from which its Irish acquaintances had just retired.

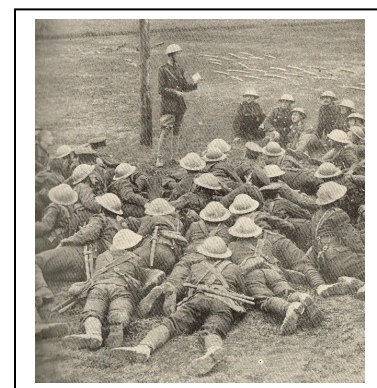
On October 3 the Battalion had marched to nearby Arques where was to entrain. On the following day it had arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from where it had marched in pouring rain to Beauval; there billets had been prepared to receive it. On successive days the unit had marched again: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it was to undergo a period of training, then eventually on the 13<sup>th</sup> through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at Tara Hill where it... *Bivouaced (sic) in a muddy field (War Diary)*... and had provided various working-parties for the next dozen or so days.



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

By 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 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 that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.



(continued)

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

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



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

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene were now being withdrawn, in several cases perhaps accelerated by the high incidence of casualties.



On October 26, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, had moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now mounds of debris - of Pozieres and Contalmaison.



(Right above and right: *The remnants of Pozieres just after the conflict, with the Australian Memorial looming in the gloom - and also as it is a century later – from a vintage post-card and from 2016*)

There the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was to remain in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when it had moved forward once more. This was to prove to be a short tour which had terminated on the night of November 2-3; there was to be no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery had apparently been active at times: casualties had been eight killed, forty-three wounded and twenty-six evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.



(Right above: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)

During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72<sup>nd</sup> and 73<sup>rd</sup> to lead in this attack...*

On the late evening of November 11 the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*

In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, an attack by the Canadians originally ordered was not to be delivered as planned. Instead the various units had been ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear re-enforced by information elicited from German prisoners.

It would appear that neither side was to move, and that the Canadians were to spent two days preparing for something that would never come to pass. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides had influenced the decision not to attack.

On the night of November 13-14, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn, its place taken in the line by the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period had been, all told, fourteen killed and thirty-eight wounded.



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

There had been two more tours in the front-line trenches and between the dates of November 19<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> the Battalion was to count a further eleven killed in action and one-hundred forty *wounded*. Two days later again, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was leave behind it the *First Battle of the Somme*.

In fact, it appears to have been one of the few units to be afforded the luxury of motor transport for at least a portion of its withdrawal - from the outskirts of Albert to Varennes. After that, from there until it arrived at its destination of Ruitz on December 4, it marched, at first in a north-westerly semi-circular direction to pass to the west of the battered city of Arras, then beyond it on to Ruitz, a commune thirty kilometres to the north-west.



(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*)

\* \* \* \* \*

On only the day following his arrival in France, Private Conway was despatched from the Base Depot at Le Havre to join his new unit; this he reportedly did on the next day again, December 8, one of some one-hundred fifty re-enforcements to arrive *in the field* on or about that date. He may have surmised at the time that the recent Battalion casualty count at *the Somme* had been a large one.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary, contrary to Private Conway's personal file, documents that it was December 9<sup>th</sup> on which... 'A draft of 150 other ranks received from 185<sup>th</sup> Highland Battalion from Nova Scotia. Men were all of good physique, intelligent and had a smart appearance...' Whichever version of the date is the correct one, Private Conway reported to *duty* in the village of Ruitz, there to participate in squad drills and rifle exercises.

**(Right: Led by pipers, soldiers of an unidentified Canadian-Scottish unit parade through a French village on their way to the front lines. – from *Le Miroir*)**



The winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches\*. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides.

This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general apparently loathed these operations.



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

**\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.**



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

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

Private Conway was not, however, to remain long in the ranks of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion; in fact, it was to be just over three weeks. On New Year's Day of 1917 he was *struck off strength* by his unit to be *taken on strength* on the following day, January 2, by the nascent 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company\*.

**\*In fact, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion itself was to be withdrawn from active service on April 14, 1917, ostensibly because of its heavy losses during the attack on Vimy Ridge - a further source has it already destined for disbandment by this time due to a lack of re-enforcements. For whatever the reason, it was officially disbanded on April 19 and its surviving personnel distributed to other formations.**

Only days later again, Private Conway was apparently once more transferred – despite the pay records which suggest this having happened perhaps as late as February 16 - on this occasion *with* the 16<sup>th</sup> CMGC, to the Canadian Corps Machine Gun School at Floringhem.

According to the Company War Diary entry of January 15, 1917, on that day...*The whole Company moved to billets in FLORINGHEM...*

\* \* \* \* \*

By August of 1916 the Canadian Army was beginning to realise the potential of the machine-gun as a weapon, and also to explore the means of exploiting it. To the newly-organized Machine Gun Companies of that 1916 – one attached to each infantry brigade – was now in 1917 to be added a total of four *more* Companies, numbered from 13 to 16 – one of them attached to each Division; thus now each of the four Canadian Divisions was to have four machine-gun companies\*.



*\*Each British and Commonwealth Division comprised three infantry brigade.*

(Right above: *Canadian machine-gun troops becoming familiar with their new Vickers weapons in the spring of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

In the case of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division this new addition was to be the 16<sup>th</sup> CMGC (*Canadian Machine-Gun Company*\*). Not long afterwards, out of this further re-organization, the Canadian Machine Gun Corps was to be *officially* born, during the month of April, 1917.

Perhaps *more* officially, on September 1 of 1917\*, the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Companies were detached from the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division and, together with the 16<sup>th</sup> CMGC, were formed into a separate unit, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, later Private Conway's eventual parent unit.

*\*This information from the 12<sup>th</sup> CMGC and 16<sup>th</sup> Company War Diaries. The Diary of the 10<sup>th</sup> CMGC does not mention this transfer at all in its pages, and the journal of the 11<sup>th</sup> CMGC is not available on line. All three available War Diaries conclude on March 31, 1918, with further re-organization (see below).*

The newly-formed 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, while active since at least that September 1 of 1917, seems not to have begun to document its history until January 1 of 1918.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, by January 15, as has already been seen, recruits to this new formation were being attached to the Canadian Corps Machine-Gun School at Floringhem, well behind the forward area to the north-west of Arras. On February 23, after an inspection by the Canadian Corps Commander, Sir Julian Byng, the School at Floringhem was closed and the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian MGC was moved to Divion, perhaps eight kilometres to the south-east, and then on the last day of that month, back to Maisnil-Bouché, for *Advanced Training*.

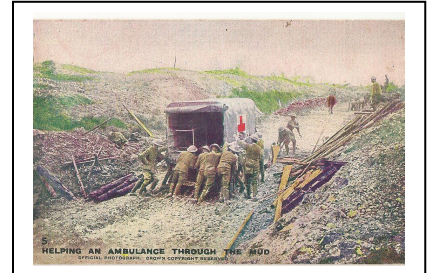
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These exercises continued there and then, as of March 7 until the end of the month, at the Bois de Bouvigny (*Bouvigny Wood(s)*) at which time the newly-formed machine-gunners were sent forward to the front area to experience *conditions under fire*\*... and to prepare for upcoming events.

*\*Necessary since some of these men were, of course, novices to active service.*

On March 12, Private Conway, having incurred shrapnel(?) wounds to the left side of his face, was evacuated to the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance in the area of *Cabaret Rouge, Souchez*. Two days following, he was forwarded to the 13<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance at Coupigny and Hersin for further treatment. Two days later again, on March 16, he was discharged to return *to duty* to his unit.



(Right above: *Transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)

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.

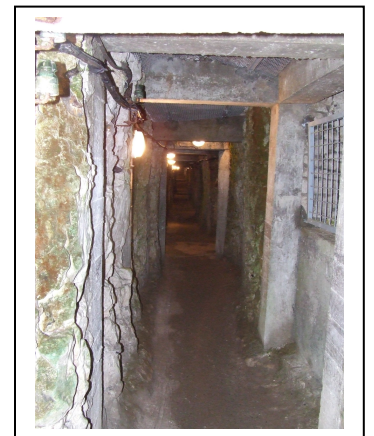


In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

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, 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 – and with British troops under its command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



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



(continued)

**(Preceding page: Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, equipped – or 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)**

**Private Conway's 16<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company remained based in the area of the Bois de Bouvigny during the days of training and preparation preceding, but also even during – and then after - the attack of April 9\*.**

**\*In fact, the unit was to remain based there, according to the War Diary, until September 2 of that same year.**

**Excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 9, 1917: The whole six guns and all four sections of the company took part in VIMY RIDGE OPERATION.**

**Fire was opened at Zero hour, 5.30 A.M. on Targets indicated and carried on according to Fire Schedule for the Operations.**

**The night firing target was altered to conform to the position reached by our Troops during the day of the 9<sup>th</sup>. This position corresponded roughly with the intermediate objective and No. 6 BARRAGE was fired as night-firing operation during night of 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>.**

**Excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 10, 1917: At dawn on APRIL 10<sup>th</sup> 2 Guns...were moved up to No. 2 CRATER to support the fire of the 12<sup>th</sup> C.M.G. Coy. The FINAL OBJECTIVE having been reached on this afternoon. Firing was carried on night of 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> according to OPERATION FIRE SCHEDULE.**

**Excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 11, 1917: Other 2 Guns moved into CRATER position – 1 O.R. wounded**

**(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)**



**Excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 12, 1917: All 16 Guns of the COMPANY took part in the capture of THE PIMPLE in conjunction with the 10<sup>th</sup> CDN. INF. BRIGADE...12 in number fired on night-firing targets for this operation. The 4 CRATER Guns fired on enemy strong point and enfiladed enemy trench...commencing at Zero hour 5. A.M. The Guns fired 1 Belt every 5 minutes, continuing fire for 1 hour...**



**(Right above: German prisoners being sent on their way back under escort through the Canadian lines – from Illustration)**

Excerpts from the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 13, 1917: *Guns...fired on Night-firing targets from 4.30 to 5.30 A.M. This operation took place on account of a suspected enemy counter-attack. The CRATER guns opened fire but were immediately compelled by heavy shell fire to cease fire...*

On the following day, April 14, the entire Company was withdrawn. Total casualties incurred by the 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company during the five days of the entire operation had amounted to that single wounded *other rank*.

The following excerpt is taken from the War Diary of the Canadian 4<sup>th</sup> Division and it allows a further general idea of the role of the Machine Gun Companies during the days prior to the *Battle of Arras* when many raids by Canadian forces occurred, as well as, of course, an overview of the services which they rendered on the opening days of the offensive when the Canadians took *Vimy Ridge*.

*The machine guns of the Division had an average of 32 guns in action each night, supplemented upon raid nights by up to as many as 90 guns by borrowing from other Divisions, Cavalry Machine Gun Squadrons and Motor batteries. They fired, on an average 15,000 rounds a night, spread over the whole German rear area, communications and overland tracks. Each raid was supported by a machine-gun barrage creeping forward 100 yards in front of the Field Artillery barrage, and proved very effective in catching troops moving out of the dug-outs after an assault.*

*During the actual assault, the machine-gun barrage was formed by 56 guns and 24 guns were sent forward to the forward area when the positions were being consolidated. The expenditure of ammunition was great, but, the machine-gun barrage served to isolate the position attacked and prevent any counter-attacks. Each gun emplacement was stocked with 30,000 rounds of ammunition.*

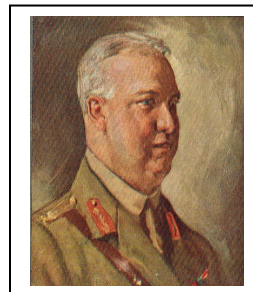
Once the five-week *Battle of Arras* had drawn to its conclusion in mid-May, the Canadian forces tended to be concentrated to the north of the recent theatre of operations. This area – more or less situated from Arras in the south to Béthune in the north – was to be the scene of further offensive action by the Canadian Corps, mainly in August and mainly in the region around the mining-centre of Lens.



One of the primary objectives would be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

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

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)



(continued)

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear. Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.



(Right above: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)

Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of the day of the attack, August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16<sup>th</sup>, several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.



(Right above: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir*)

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.



(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action by its crew – from Le Miroir*)

However, as the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade War Diarist writes on August 17, two days after the major attack on *Hill 70*... *This is the first time since the arrival of the Brigade in FRANCE that it has been holding the line next to a big operation in which it has had no active part. The role of the Brigade has been to draw as much attention as possible to its area by means of digging trenches and cutting wire to distract the enemy's attention from the theatre of operations North of the River (the River Souchez).*

The 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade War Diarist, apparently documenting the operation as seen from the point of view of the infantry battalions of his unit, had overlooked the role that the machine-gun companies attached to his Brigade were now to be ordered to play\*.

The Diarist was right, of course, that it had been the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions responsible for this operation. However, the 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company War Diary entry for that August 15 recorded that...*All guns took part in 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> CDN. DIV. operation, morning of 15<sup>th</sup> inst.*

*\*It is to be remembered that the 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company was at the time attached to the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade which was a component of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division.*

Firing positions had been dug and constructed as early as a week prior to the attack although some of the guns had not been *in situ*, laid or ready to fire, until noon of August 14. From the time of the first barrage fired at twenty-five minutes past four on the following morning until mid-night of August 17-18, there had been numerous calls from the infantry for intensive fire, several changes of targets dependent on the multiple attacks and counter-attacks made by both sides, as well a continuous rate of slow fire on pre-set targets.

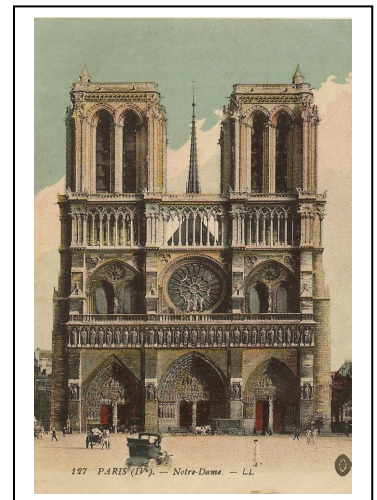
Less than forty-eight hours later, on August 19, Private Conway's Company was ordered into support of 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade operations until August 26 when it was then allotted the same role with the 11<sup>th</sup> CIB. On the following day, August 27, the unit then occupied defensive positions and settled into its habitual forward-area routine.

It would appear from some sources that the Canadians had expected, and had even planned, further action in the area, but the ongoing *Battle of Passchendaele* in Belgium was not proceeding according to expectations and the British were running out of reinforcements. The Canadians – and the Anzacs - were to be asked to provide the necessary man-power.

September of 1917 thus being a time of organizing and otherwise preparing for an eventual transfer to Belgium, there was an opportunity for *leave* to be granted. For some it was a return to the United Kingdom; for Private Conway the allotment was to be ten days in Paris, from the second day of the month until the twelfth.

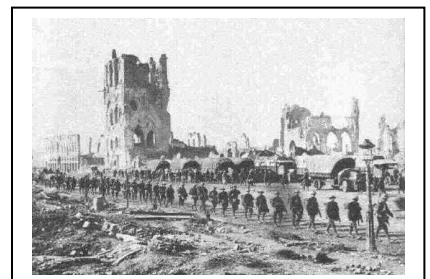
Unfortunately, he was returned to his encampment on September 7, having been arrested on the first day of that *leave*. He was thereupon sentenced on September 11 to... *fourteen days of Field Punishment Number 1* for... *Drunkenness in Paris while on active service*.

(Right: *Notre-Dame de Paris in or before the year 1916* – from a vintage post-card)



As seen some pages above, it had been on September 1 of 1917\* that the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Companies had been detached from the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division and, together with the 16<sup>th</sup> CMGC, had been formed into a separate unit, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisional Machine Gun Battalion, now to be an autonomous force under the direct command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division.

It was to be in the middle of October that the Canadians were to be ordered north into Belgium and to the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the end of that July - 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.



(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*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which were to spearhead the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the *official* end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

*\*This is not to belittle the sacrifice of the British troops – or any others - who were still serving in the area and of whom more than a quarter-million were to become casualties.*

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



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



Meanwhile, on October 12 the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company began to move out of the sectors that the Canadians had occupied since *First Somme* and commenced moving northwards towards - and then into - Belgium.

Private Conway's Company first overnighted in Ham-en-Artois before moving on to the community of Hondegghem. There they occupied a rest camp for some eight days, during which period there was physical training each morning plus a route march undertaken each and every afternoon.

On October 22 the unit moved into Belgium: by bus from Hondegghem to the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres; and then across the rubble to the north-eastern part of *the Salient* to Potijze for a brief stop before advancing into the forward area later on that same day.

(Right: *Ypres: The remains of a college and a fire-station in 1919, just after the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



By the late evening of October 23 the guns and gunners of Private Conway's unit had resumed the practice of night-firing: apart from rendering the supply and re-enforcement of his units that much more difficult, it also obliged the Germans to remain alert and awake at night. On the other hand, visits by German aircraft had the same effect on the Canadians endeavouring to catch a few moments of sleep.

(continued)

Then on two subsequent days, October 25 and 26, the Company supported the efforts of the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade in a first minor operation before an all-day effort, a day on which the Company was firing non-stop from five in the morning until seven-fifteen, some two hours later, a period in which the unit expended some thirty-five thousand rounds.

*'Harrassing-fire'* against any and everything that moved on the German side of the line was the order of the days October 27 and 28, the latter spiced-up with supporting fire for a minor raid undertaken by the 44<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion.

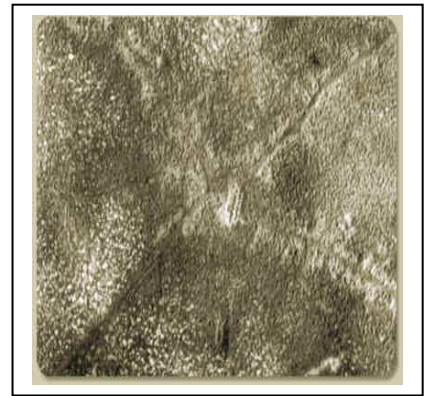


(Right above: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

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

October 29 was relatively quiet for the Company personnel in the forward area, night-firing having been the only recorded offensive action of that day.

But the next one saw a major Canadian attack by troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Divisions advancing up the slope from Zonnebeke towards the village of Passchendaele.



Excerpt from 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for October 30, 1918: *Zero hour...was 5.40 a.m. From 6.30 a.m. all guns in barrage positions were subjected to exceedingly heavy shell fire – 5 guns of No 4 Battery were blown up by shell-fire and all remaining guns were forced to evacuate their positions... The BLUE LINE captured...6 guns went 'over the top' with Battalions & took up defensive positions in Front & Support Lines...*

It was for his part in this action that Private Conway was later commended in the Company War Diary and recommended to be decorated.

From this point on, the primary Canadian role in the *Third Battle of Ypres* was taken from the metaphoric shoulders of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions and placed on those of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions. But whereas the *infantry* of the two former Divisions was soon to be leaving *the Salient* for a return to France, the machine-guns – and the artillery – was to remain.

There was to be a six-day period, from November 4 to 10, during which Private Conway's unit would re-organize and rest in the area of the northern French town of Cæstre, a period after which it returned *to duty* based at Potijze. From there it relieved and supported minor operations by other units, but was not involved in any major offensive. On November 20 the unit was withdrawn to the rear area of Poperinghe.

(Right: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial. – photograph from 2010*)



From there the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Company returned to France, by bus from Belgium to the vicinity of the French community of Merville, thence to Busnes on the morrow, from where it then moved to Diéval on the next day again, November 23. It was to remain based on Diéval until December 18.

(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*)



In the month of December, after the withdrawal from Belgium, Private Conway and the other personnel of the 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company had the right to cast a vote in the Canadian General Election, polling booths having been opened for Canadian Forces from December 4 to 17 for that purpose.

Private Conway voted on December 10. Apparently there was only a single soldier in his unit who chose not to do so: *He had brothers fighting, 1 brother killed and another wounded. He did not wish (he said) to vote against Conscription, nor did he wish to be instrumental in forcing his only remaining brother in Canada to enlist.* (Excerpt from 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company War Diary entry for December 10, 1917)

\* \* \* \* \*

Then came a decoration. Authorized by the Canadian Corps on December 21 of 1917, one month later it was gazetted as follows:

*The London Gazette Supplement (30540, page 2435) of February 23, 1918, cites that: His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to confer the Military Medal for bravery in the Field to the undermentioned Non-Commissioned Officers and Men... 877129 Pte. J. Conway, M.G. Corps.*

There appears to be no further documentation a propos the decoration among Private Conway's own papers. However, amongst the 16<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company War Diary Addenda for the month of October 1917 – there is no date recorded – is to be found the following entry: *Pte. W.F. DEVINEY and Pte. J. CONWAY displayed great coolness and bravery in trying circumstances.*



(continued)



And on a Canada Military Honours and Awards Citation Card is also the following: *For conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty when, in an action near PASSCHENDAELE of October 30<sup>th</sup> 1917, although wounded\*, he remained under heavy shell fire and continued to operate his machine gun.*

*\*However, this is contradicted by the unit's War Diary. Private Conway's name does not figure among the casualties documented for that month.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Two months prior to this gazetting, on January 1 of the New Year, 1918, the War Diary of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion had come into being. As the 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company was a unit of the Battalion, and as the War Diary of the same 16<sup>th</sup> CMG Company was to close at the end of March, in three months' time, it is the history of the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion which will hereafter recount the remainder of Private Conway's war-time career.

At the conclusion of the daily entries for January of 1918, the War Diarist for the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion - at the time in the areas of Lens, adjacent Liévin and Carency, some five kilometres to the south-west - made the following resume of the month under the title...*General: Apart from manning forward and support m/g/ emplacements and carrying out harassing fire the efforts of the Battalion were devoted to organizing and completing a strong m/g/ defensive scheme which involved after a thorough reconnaissance, the construction of new m/g e s (emplacements?) and dugouts, and to the establishing of SAA (small arms ammunition), ration, water and supply dumps...*

*...On account of the enemy bombing from aircraft – and in anticipation of bombing from the air becoming more prevalent and persistent, orders were issued for the erection of mud walls around huts and transport lines...*

(Right: A suburb of the city and mining-centre of Lens at some time towards the end of – or just subsequent to – the Great War – from a vintage post-card)



During that month there had been but six casualties: three *other ranks* wounded and three *other ranks* gassed. If anything - the Battalion still posted to the same areas until the middle of the month when all four Companies retired to *Marqueffles Farm* and began training - the month of February proved to be even quieter, with only three *other ranks* reported as having been wounded.

On March 11 the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion returned to the forward area, specifically to Carency, to Lens, and to St-Émile, a mining district in the northern outskirts of Lens and not far distant from *Hill 70* which the Canadians had attacked and captured in August of 1917 – and which Private Conway already knew all too well.

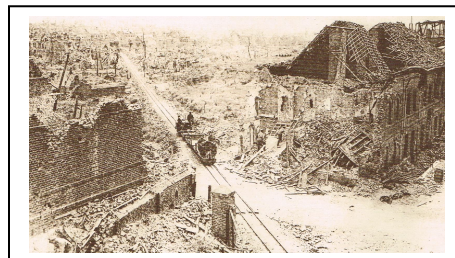
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On this occasion St-Émile was to be a great deal more placid than it had been those several months earlier: however, the artillery of both sides was still spasmodically active; there were preparations underway for a raid; enemy aircraft were to make several appearances; and night-firing on pre-set targets, usually enemy supply routes, was a routine on which some twenty-five to thirty-thousand rounds per diem were expended.

This activity in the forward area continued well into March...and then the first day of the spring of 1918 arrived.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the enemy came to victory in that spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans launched a massive attack, Operation 'Michael', on March 21.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – in the sector where the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was serving - in March of 1918, 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 main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops serving there, particularly at the juncture with the adjacent French Army.

The German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was to be the result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were to be 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 29<sup>th</sup> Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



In the meantime, several days passed before news of the German success filtered down to many Canadian units. In the case of the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion it was just two days before the first revelation that all was not as well as might be wished for. On March 23...*All leave stopped...*and there was an unusual shuffling of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Machine Gun Companies in the *Loos Sector* - and of the Canadian Machine Gun Battalions elsewhere.



(continued)

Two days later again...*All ranks return from Courses of instruction and all detached men except those on leave return to Battalion.* (From War Diary entry of March 25, 1918)

(Preceding page: *The mining village of Loos-en-Gohelle as it was already in 1915, before the arrival of the Canadians to the area: the structures atop the pit-heads in the centre of the photograph became known to the British troops – and thus later to the Canadians – as Tower Bridge.* – from *Le Miroir*)

At this time many Canadian units were being prepared for either a possible move southward towards the theatre of battle, or for a German attack anticipated in the area of Arras, this being the northernmost sector to be involved in the enemy offensive. Certainly at times the increased enemy artillery activity lent itself to that belief.

To that end the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion found itself transferred to the south-west, to the area of Écurie and Mont St-Éloi, being ordered posted into four locales within two days\* before being re-organized\*\*. Three Batteries of each of the 1<sup>st</sup> (new) Company and of the 2<sup>nd</sup> (new) Company of the Battalion were then sent to the forward area in the *Gavrelle Sector* to relieve a British machine-gun unit. One Battery from each (new) Company remained for the moment in reserve in the area of Écurie.

*\*This was not an unusual happening at the time: units were posted hither and thither, some marching in circles for several days as commands and counter-commands were issued in short order.*

*\*\*The four Companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion were now reorganized into two larger Companies: the original Companies numbered 10 and 16 now formed the new Number 1 Company and the original Companies Numbered 11 and 12 became the new Number 2 Company. Each of these new companies was divided into four Batteries (sub-divided into two Half-Batteries) of twelve guns each.*

(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. The community is not to be confused with St-Éloi in Belgium.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)



By this time, the end of March and beginning of April, the Germans were still very much on the offensive on *the Somme*, and were to remain thus for a further month. Nevertheless, the situation in the south was beginning to stabilize and the Canadian units were to remain where they were\*.

*\*Of course, the attack in the north of France and in Belgium was yet to fall upon the soldiery stationed there.*



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the *Wikipedia* web-site)

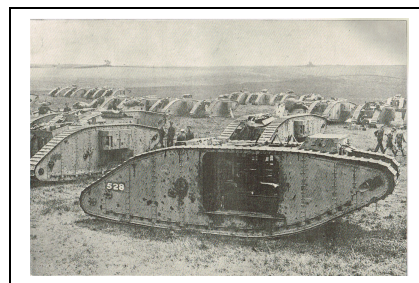
The Canadian Machine Gun Battalions were also now about to increase their fire-power. A directive of or from about April 18, 1918, decreed that: *Canadian Machine Gun Battalions are to be increased by a 3<sup>rd</sup>. Company of 32 guns and the necessary personnel...*

And then, towards the end of April, the German offensive having been contained, the Allies – their High Command now unified under Foch – and the newly-arriving American divisions were now to contemplate an offensive of their own. In the meantime, all was relatively quiet as both sides rested, re-enforced and re-organized.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion War Diary records that the unit remained in the sectors to the north of Arras and surrounding Lens until the final day of July.

Apart from some exercises with Australian troops and their tanks, there appears to have been little other than the daily routine to be documented.

(Right: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'.* – from *Illustration*)



However, on the first day of August all that changed for the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, as it was to change at that time for just about every Canadian battalion. The entire Canadian Corps was to move south in a sweeping semi-circular motion around to the west of the city of Amiens, then to turn eastward again to face the Germans on the ground where *Operation Michael* had been brought to a halt some four months before.

(Right: *The gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918* – photograph from 2007(?))



This was all to be done without the enemy's knowledge, thus the move was accomplished within a period of less than two weeks and by moving on foot and by night. When the attack went in on the morning of August 8 it was obvious that it had come as a complete surprise to the Germans.

At twenty minutes past four – zero hour - on that morning, the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion began its move forward in support of the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry, some of the personnel and their weapons being carried to their first objectives by tanks.

And this was only the beginning.

(continued)

In some places the German resistance was strong and at times the enemy counter-attacked, bombed and shelled the advancing troops; but nevertheless, in those sectors where tanks were employed, the advance was relentless. By the end of that first day the Canadian forces had moved forward some eleven kilometres, something almost unheard of\* since the end of the summer of 1914.



(Right above: *A party of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background. – from Le Miroir*)

*\*The first day of the Battle of Cambrai in November, 1917, and the German offensives of that spring of 1918 were perhaps the exceptions.*



(Right above: *On August 8, captured positions on the Somme being consolidated by Canadian troops against any German counter-attack – from Le Miroir*)

The Canadian 4<sup>th</sup> Division withdrew from the field only on the night of August 13-14 – to be replaced by the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division - by which time about twenty kilometres had been wrested from the enemy who was, by now, abandoning much of the ground won during his offensive of that previous spring.

Just more than a week later again, Private Conway's 4<sup>th</sup> Machine-Gun Battalion was being relieved by French units who were now assuming the Canadian responsibility for the continuation of the battle. The Canadian Corps – all four Divisions – were to be transferred again, moving back whence they had come, to the *Arras Front*. They were to move back there in much the same manner in which they had arrived only those three weeks previously – by motor transport, by train and inevitably, of course, on foot – and in secret.



(Right above: *French dead commemorated in the communal cemetery at Caix: the community also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground. – photograph from 2017*)

On August 28 the unit arrived back into the area of Arras; on August 29 the 4<sup>th</sup> Machine-Gun Battalion then moved into a concentration area to the east of the city. The Canadians were about to go on the offensive once more and by the night of September 1-2 the Battalion had moved into its assembly areas in preparation for the advance on that next morning of what had been planned to be a three-day operation.

The attack went in as scheduled on that morning of September 2. Advancing along the axis of the main Arras-Cambrai road, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division – and thus the 4<sup>th</sup> MG Battalion – moved in the direction of the village of Dury and the nearby high ground.

In places the resistance from their counterparts, the German machine-gunners, was fierce, and not all objectives were reached on that first day.

On the morning of the morrow, September 3, the attack was resumed.

(Right: *The Canadian monument which stands in commemoration of the Battle of the Drocourt-Quéant Line and some of the ground on which the action was fought: The plinth is to be found by the side Arras-Cambrai road in the vicinity of the village of Dury. – photograph from 2016*)



Excerpts from the 4<sup>th</sup> CMG Battalion War Diary Appendix entry for the day: *...No opportunities for supporting fire were offered, some casualties were suffered from heavy artillery fire, during the advance.*

*Owing to Machine Gun and Artillery fire it was found impossible to push...Batteries over the ridge...so these occupied positions on the west side of the ridge.*

(Right: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line. – from Le Miroir*)

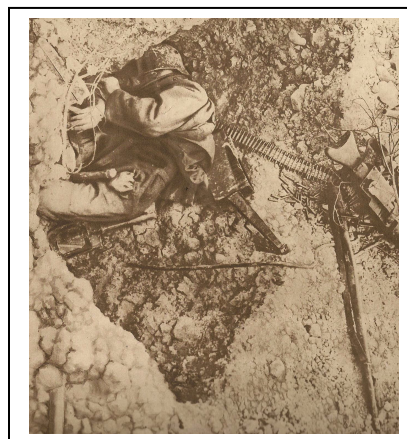


*During the afternoon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> September and the night 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> September the ground gained was occupied and occupied in depth as far back as the DROCOURT-QUEANT Support Line, these positions being maintained until being relieved...*

(Right: *A German machine-gunner, who also gave his all, dead at his post – from Illustration*)

Casualty report: *“Died of Wounds” in the Field, France – CANAL DU NORD, SAUCHY-CAUCHY*

The son of Thomas Conway, fisherman – to whom, as of October 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay - and of Bridget Conway (née *Curran*), of Colliers Central, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Denis, to Elizabeth, to Anastasia and to Mary\*.



*\*In the records of Saints Peter & Paul Parish in Harbour Main the baptism is documented of a James Conway, son of Thomas and Bridget (Curran) Conway, on October 20, 1881. Whether this child subsequently died or whether the birth date of (Private) Conway is incorrect is not clear.*

(continued)

**Post-1881 birth records of the Conway children are likely to be found in the Mission of Conception Harbour records – established 1884. The information on this current page is partially drawn from ‘Conways in Newfoundland – Genealogy.com’.**



**Private Conway was at first reported as wounded and then as having died of wounds received in action, in the field – possibly of gun-shot wounds to the head - on September 3, 1918, near Sauchy-Cauchy, one kilometre to the east of the Canal du Nord.**



**(Right top: German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai – from Le Miroir)**

**(Right above: The same area of the Canal du Nord as it is almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it – photograph from 2015)**

**James (known as Jimmie) Conway had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-seven years and five months: date of birth in the District of Harbour Main, Newfoundland, (also see \* above), October 10, 1888.**



**Private James Conway 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 25, 2023.**