



Gunner Joshua Coombs (also found as *Coombes*) (Regimental Number 85933) of the 23rd Battery, 5th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery: Grave reference VII D 3.

(Right: The image of the Canadian Field Artillery (Style “A”) cap badge is from the E-Bay web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman, Joshua Coombs has left little information behind him a propos his early life in the fishing community of Upper Island Cove, Newfoundland. However, the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* making the crossing of April 6 of 1913, from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, documents a twenty-one year-old J. Coombs among those travelling.

This young man – again according to the passenger list - was on his way to work as a labourer in the nearby industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton.

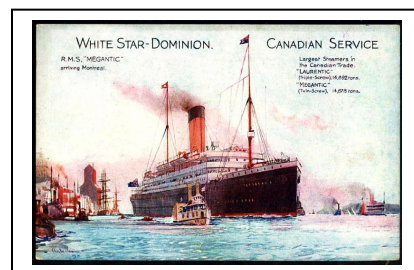
If indeed this be our Joshua Coombs, the subject of this short biography, within a period of some twenty months he was to then make the six-hundred fifty kilometre journey from Sydney to Fredericton, the capital of the Canadian province of New Brunswick, for it was there in the final month of 1914 that he was to enlist.

The files, including his first pay records, show that it was on December 15 of that year that he presented himself in Fredericton for enlistment - as it was on that day that he was first remunerated for his services - and three days afterwards for a medical examination, a procedure which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. On the same December 21 he was attested, his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

It was apparently still December 21 when the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by Major B.A. Ingraham, Officer Commanding the 24th Battery of the 6th Howitzer Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery – by which unit Gunner Coombs was to be immediately been *taken on strength* - when he declared – on paper – that...*Joshua Coombs...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

Nine weeks later, Gunner Coombs, his 24th Battery and the greater part of the 6th Howitzer Brigade boarded ship in Halifax Harbour for overseas service in the United Kingdom and points beyond.

(Right: *The image of Megantic, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. She survived the conflict to be sold for scrap in 1933.*)



The ship was His Majesty's Transport *Megantic*, a trans-Atlantic passenger vessel requisitioned by the government for the duration of hostilities. Gunner Coombs embarked on February 23 of 1915 hours before the ship sailed; he was not alone to do so: Also taking passage were the 22rd and 23rd Batteries of the 6th Howitzer Brigade, the Brigade Headquarters' Staff, the Brigade's Ammunition Column personnel, 'C' Squadron of the 7th Canadian Mounted Rifles Regiment and a part of the 30th Battalion of Canadian Infantry.

Having sailed on the same February 23 for the English west-coast port of Avonmouth, Bristol, *Megantic* is documented as having berthed there on March 7 after a slow voyage of some twelve days.

A month before Gunner Coombs was to disembark in England, Avonmouth had been a particularly busy place. The (1st) Canadian Division had been in training on the Salisbury Plain since October of 1914 before it was to be ordered to the *Western Front* during the second week of February, 1915. It had passed through Avonmouth and sailed to the French port of St-Nazaire.

**There was only one Canadian Division at this time; eventually there would be five of which four were to serve on the Continent. Before the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division the first such unit was usually known simply as the Canadian Division.*

At the same time, the few Canadian contingents which had remained in England to become re-enforcement and training units, had soon been transferred to the Kentish coast, to the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone just south of Dover. There a small British camp was to be rapidly transformed into the major Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* and it was to there that Gunner Coombs' unit was posted.

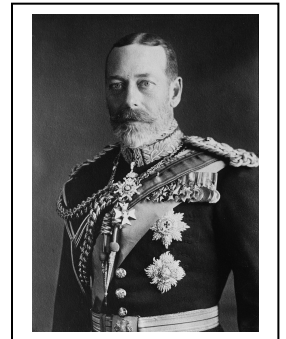
(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)



Gunner Coombs was now to remain with his unit for less than four weeks; the Canadian Artillery was now – not for the last time – to undergo re-organization and while Gunner Coombs would still serve in the area of *Shorncliffe*, as of April 2 of that 1915 it would be as a soldier of the 3rd Reserve Battery of the 5th Canadian Artillery Brigade.

He is also recorded as having been admitted into the *Tent Hospital* on St. Martin's Plain, just to the north-west of Folkestone. Suspected of having contracted a venereal problem, it may well have been a false alert as he apparently remained under medical care for the brief period of at most three days, from July 27 to 29.

At some point during the period from mid-September until the middle of January of the New Year, 1916, Gunner Coombs re-joined his former unit which by this time had – temporarily – changed its designation to the 8th Howitzer Brigade*, and its training grounds to another *Shorncliffe* site, *Otterpool*. A number of re-enforcements for the Brigade are reported as having reported *to duty* at this time, but when precisely Gunner Coombs did so is not to be found among his papers.



If it was before October 2, then he would have been in time to parade before the King on that day.

(Right above: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – the photograph is from Bain News Services via the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

** As seen above, there had already been a 6th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade – the one into which Gunner Coombs had originally enlisted – which, as also recounted above, had been disbanded before ever being ordered from England to the Continent. The new 6th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade of this present file which was now to replace it, as seen in the preceding paragraph, had originally been designated as the 8th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade, having once more changed its identity to become the 6th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade on October 26 of 1915, while it and Gunner Coombs were still in England.*

This new, second, 6th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade which was now to cross the Channel from England to *active service* on the Continent on January 18-19 of 1916, was a unit of the fledgling 2nd Canadian Division. The 6th Brigade was to travel by the circuitous route – because of the port facilities necessary for its guns and other heavy equipment – from *Shorncliffe* through Southampton on the English south coast to the Canadian Base Depot at *Rouelles Camp*, established by then in the vicinity of the French industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine.

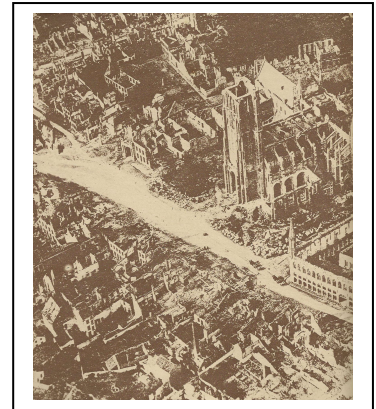
(Right below: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

After a day of rest the 6th Brigade and Gunner Coombs were transported northwards from Le Havre by train to an encampment in Belgium not far-removed from the Franco-Belgian frontier where, only a single day later again, the unit's personnel was to begin receiving instruction from the 118th Howitzer Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery whose positions the Canadian unit were then about to inherit.



The 2nd Canadian Division – of which, as seen above, the 6th C.F.A. Brigade was an element - had already been stationed in Belgium for four months by the time of Gunner Coombs' artillery unit's arrival, having landed in France in mid-September of 1915 to be immediately posted into the *Kingdom of Belgium* to an area north of Ploegsteert – where the 1st Canadian Division had by then already been serving – and to the south of the shattered medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).

(Right: *An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the 'Ville morte'.* – from *Illustration*)



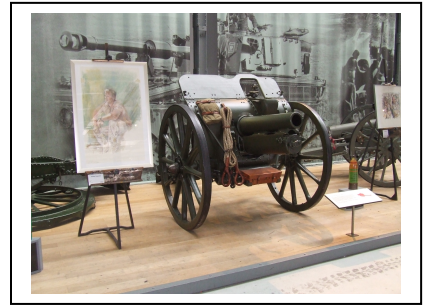
However, a shortage of artillery would necessitate that a number of Royal Artillery formations, such as the afore-mentioned 118th Howitzer Brigade, R.F.A., temporarily supply fire-power for the newly-arrived Division until such time as Canadian guns and personnel were to become available – much of it in the summer of 1916.

The 6th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade at the time appears to have comprised three batteries (Numbers 21, 22, 23), each equipped with three of the 4.5 inch howitzer standard to the British Army*.

It was with the 23rd Battery that Gunner Coombs was to serve.

**A howitzer, a short-range-weapon, fired a shell high into the air and was thus able to direct plunging fire onto targets, down into trench systems and enemy gun-pits, and behind obstacles such as buildings and hills.*

(Right: A British-made 4.5-inch howitzer which equipped some twenty-five per cent of British and Commonwealth artillery during the Great War: It is seen here in the Royal Artillery Museum – today unfortunately closed - at the Woolwich Arsenal. – photograph from 20012(?))



(Right below: Two types of six-inch calibre howitzers also used by British and Commonwealth artillery during the Great War.

On the left is a BL-26cwt, a gun introduced in 1915 but here using a World War II carriage ; to the right is an older six-inch 30 cwt howitzer, first used in 1902 then throughout the Great War, although it was not a particularly successful weapon. – photographs taken at the Royal Artillery Museum at the Woolwich Arsenal in 1912(?))



The 6th Brigade War Diary suggests that it was towards the end of the first week of February of 1916 that the personnel would conclude its instruction with the British 118th Brigade and would move into positions from which, after having registered its guns, it was to fire its first shots in anger towards the other side of the lines. For the next seven weeks further registration, harassing fire, retaliation, counter-battery fire, the destruction of enemy wire – some of this at times accomplished in co-operation with aerial observers in planes and balloons – were to be just some of the myriad tasks undertaken by the Numbers 21, 22 and 23 Batteries, Canadian Field Artillery.

Of course, the German artillery was operating likewise and there were to be casualties at times incurred by the 6th Brigade – the first perhaps having been one *killed* and three *wounded* on February 15 (as well as eight horses *killed**) – although, of course, the numbers were nothing to compare with those of the Canadian infantry in the trenches situated well to the front of the gun-emplacements of the Canadian gunners.

**The 'Animals in War' web-site cites... 'eight million horses and countless mules and donkeys'... as having died during the conflict.*

The 2nd Canadian Division was now to undertake its first major infantry operation during the period of March 27, 1916, and April 17 in co-operation with British forces.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* would officially take place in the vicinity of St-Éloi, a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres. It was to be here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they had detonated on that March 27. That detonation would then be followed up by an infantry assault.



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

After a brief initial success the attack soon bogged down – due to those very mine-craters which, filled with water, were to prove impassable - and by April 4 the Canadians were to be 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 eventually to be *officially* called off, both sides were to find themselves back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

During this operation, of course, the 6th Canadian Field Artillery (*Howitzer*) Brigade was to play its role in supporting the efforts of the infantry of its parent unit, the 2nd Canadian Division.

Excerpt from the 6th C.F.A. Brigade War Diary for March 27, 1916: *...carried out to support the attack that the 5th Corps made on the mound at ST. ELOI...*

The 23rd Batty which was attached to 3rd Division did excellent work...

The 22nd Battalion which was allotted the task of blotting out a trench completely demolished it and was then turned onto other trenches...

21st Batty was used as a counter-batty and did good work...

According to the Appendices found in its own – admittedly biased - War Diary the 6th Brigade was not only to be successful in its given undertakings but would manage to turn its subsequent attentions to other targets in support of what at the time was the initial assault, undertaken by British forces.

The 6th Brigade continued its support of British troops despite having been scheduled for relief on the nights of April 7-8 and 8-9, at a time when the Canadian infantry had been becoming more and more involved. And despite Canadian history citing April 17 as having been the date which marked the official end of the confrontation, it appears that no-one had bothered to consult the German guns and gunners.

After a further month of...*very active artillery*...it was not until May 16 that the 6th Brigade War Diary would record...*enemy artillery normal*...for four successive days before finally having been able to employ the word...*quiet*...in his report of April 17.

And the 6th Brigade appears to have played its part combatting its German counterparts during all the ongoing events of this period.

On May 22 the organization of the 6th CFA Brigade was to be changed: it was no longer to be comprised solely of howitzers but would now resemble the other artillery brigades of the British and Commonwealth Field Artillery forces. There were now to be four batteries, three of them employing the British-made 18-pounder field gun, and one continuing to use the 4.5-inch howitzer. The 6th Brigade was now to incorporate the 15th, 16th and 28th Battery (18-pdrs)* and one of the original three howitzer batteries, the 22nd.



While the number of guns – at this time four - serving each battery was later to increase, these were to be the weapons with which the unit would now fight the remainder of its war.

**The trajectory of the shells fired by these guns was much flatter than that of the howitzer's fire and thus carried further. The shells used – weighing eighteen pounds - often comprised shrapnel as opposed to high-explosive which was usually the choice for the howitzers.*

(Right above: A British eighteen-pounder quick-firing artillery piece, the mainstay of the British and Empire (Commonwealth) artillery forces during the Great War, here seen at the Imperial War Museum, London – photograph from 2011(?))

Gunner Coombs was now to be transferred with his 23rd (Howitzer) Battery to serve with the 5th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade.

Excerpt from the 5th CFA Brigade War Diary entry for May 22, 1916: Rearrangement of (Field) A(rtillery) How(itzer) batteries came into effect this morning. Fifth Brigade now consists of 17th, 18th and 20th Batteries FA and 23rd How Batty. Necessary registration on front line completed and communication established.

The newly-reformed 5th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade now had some ten days to organize before the *Great War* would once more descend on the Canadian sector.

This next occasion on which the Canadians – having by now become the *Canadian Corps* – were to be engaged in a major operation, would be in the south-eastern sector of the *Ypres Salient*, on that part of the front for which the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division had taken responsibility at the end of March and beginning of April, during which time the 2nd Canadian Division had been engaged at St-Éloi.

And it was to come about at the outset of the month of that June of 1916.

From June 2 of 1916 until June 13, only some two weeks after the continued ferocious German artillery action at St-Éloi had diminished, was to be fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the surrounding areas of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the Army of the Kaiser and the Canadian Corps.



(Preceding page: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans were to deliver their offensive. They were then to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity of which, fortunately, they had not taken advantage to exploit.



(Right above: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914*)



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

(Right below: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 – when a British mine detonated underneath reduced its summit, and any resemblance to a hill, into very small pieces - in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooze, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014*)

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack for the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation had proved a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were not to go in – those that *did* go in, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds. The enemy had remained in the captured Canadian positions and the Canadians had been left to ponder an extremely heavy casualty list.



Ten days later – on the night of June 12-13 - the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part had been recovered, both sides were now to be back where they had started – except for a small German gain at *Hooze* - and the cemeteries had been that much more full.



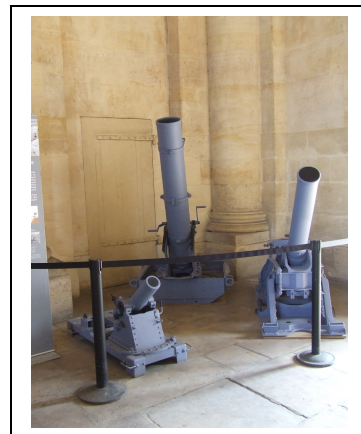
(Right: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)

The 2nd Canadian Division at this time was the one furthest removed from the scene of the German attack; thus logically it was the 3rd Canadian Division on whose front the assault had fallen, and the by-then adjacent 1st Canadian Division* whose troops were to do the majority of the fighting. The units of the 2nd Canadian Division were to be less involved, although this was not always true: case in point - the first Battle Honour of the *Great War* earned by the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the 2nd Division was to be *Mount Sorrel*.

**In April of 1916, the 1st Canadian Division had been transferred from the Ploegsteert Sector on the Franco-Belgian frontier, to the area just south of Ypres. Thus the Canadians were to be stationed side by side by side – from the German point of view, the 3rd on the right, the 1st next and in the middle, then with the 2nd Canadian Division on the left flank.*

The War Diary of the newly-organized 5th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade during this eleven-day period, shows that while the Battery had been continually active, it was usually to be engaged in retaliatory fire against an ever-dangerous German artillery program and in counter-battery work when and where the enemy guns and trench-mortars could be located.



(Right above: Not German but - dating from the time of the Great War - comparable French trench mortars which used to stand as shown, here in the entrance to the Musée de l'Armée, Paris – photograph from 2015)

On June 12, during the day, a ten-hour bombardment in three stages was undertaken in preparation for a counter-attack just after one o'clock on the following morning of June 13. The assault itself was to be preceded by a further – intense – bombardment of forty-five minutes. However, the 2nd Canadian Division was to play only a peripheral role and its artillery – including the 5th Brigade operating from the area of Dickebusch to the south-west of Ypres – would continue its work much as recounted in the preceding paragraph.

The Canadian attack of June 13 was to be the final infantry action initiated by either side during the *Battle of Mount Sorrel* although both artilleries were to continue their work which had then gradually diminished in fury over the following days.

(Right: A convoy of ammunition on its way to providing shells to artillery units: This image was likely taken at the Somme during the summer offensive of 1916. Although the British Army was the most mechanized of all the combatants during the Great War, the majority of its transport still was dependent upon animal power. – from Le Miroir)

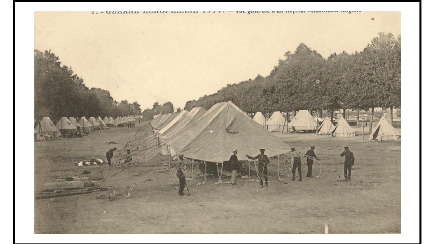


The summer of 1916 was now to be a relatively quiet time for the Canadian Corps – perhaps it was the proverbial *calm before the storm*. The early summer was to see a number of raids undertaken by the infantry but only some of these were to require a great amount of artillery preparation as *surprise* seems by then to have become a favoured tactic of the time.

The 5th CFA Brigade War Diary entries for July 16 and 17 read partially as follows: *July 16 – Dickebusch – Enemy trench mortars very active on our front but other artillery fire practically nil. No retaliation required.*

July 17 – Our immediate front quiet...

Gunner Coombs was injured by shell-fire on or about July 17 of 1916. Having incurred shrapnel wounds to the left arm and a fractured spine, he was evacuated on that same day to the 10th Casualty Clearing Station at the *Rémy Sidings*, close to the Belgian town of Poperinghe. There he was considered to be...*dangerously ill.*



(Right above: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)*

For the following six days there was to be...*no change...*reported in his condition.

The son of Joshua Coombs, former fisherman deceased on or about May 1, 1916, and of Elizabeth (also found as *Eliza*) Coombs, deceased before her husband on February 9, 1913, he was also brother to William, to Ellen-Mary, to David – who later received his medals - and to Henry.

Gunner Coombs was reported by the Officer Commanding the 10th Casualty Clearing Station as having *died of wounds* on July 23, 1916.

Joshua Coombs had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and three months: year of birth at Upper Island Cove, Newfoundland, District of Harbour Grace, 1893.

Gunner William Augustine Winsor 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 23, 2023.