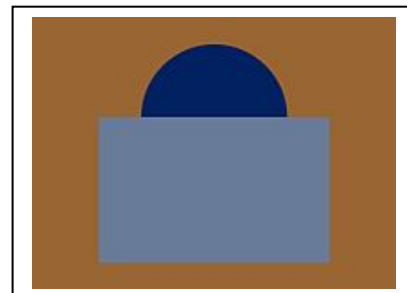


Private James Fitzgerald, MM, Number 2356424 of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*New Ontario*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in a family grave in Western Bay (*Holy Rosary*) Roman Catholic Cemetery, Western Bay, Newfoundland.

Right: The image of the shoulder-flash of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*New Ontario*) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

(continued)



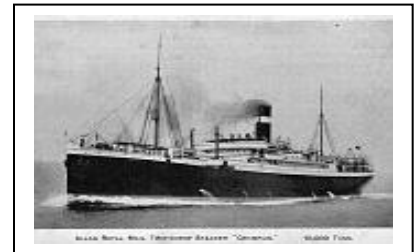


His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of both seaman and carpenter, James Fitzgerald was living in Cleveland, Ohio, by 1918 and travelled from there to cross the U.S.A.-Canada border on February 28(?) of 1918\*. However, he is recorded as having enlisted in Guelph on February 22\*, 1918 – the day on which, according to his pay records, the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services - and as then having undergone medical examination and attestation on the following day, February 23.

*\*February 28 is, of course, five days after he is recorded as having enlisted. Yet the United States' border crossing card bearing that date – from Ancestry.ca - also documents the same address in Cleveland – 720 Frankford Street - that James Fitzgerald has entered on his attestation papers so it is the right person – error in the date?*

On the same February 23, his attachment to the 1<sup>st</sup> Depot Battalion (*Western Ontario Regiment*) was confirmed and Private Fitzgerald was... *finally approved and inspected* by its Commanding Officer. Since the task of the Depot Battalions was to instil only a minimum of training and discipline in its incoming recruits before despatching them to the Canadian Reserve Battalions in the United Kingdom to complete the job, it is not surprising that Private Fitzgerald was to spend only some six weeks in uniform in Canada before being ordered overseas.

It was on March 25, as a soldier of the 5<sup>th</sup> Draft of the same 1<sup>st</sup> Depot Battalion (*WOR*) that he sailed from Halifax on board His Majesty's Transport *Grampian*, having embarked the day before. At least the 2<sup>nd</sup> Draft of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Depot Battalion (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*) also embarked on board the vessel - as a goodly number of detachments from divers units were departing from Canada on that same day – but any others which sailed on *Grampian* appear not to have been recorded.



(Right above: *The image of the Allan Lines steamship Grampian is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

Upon its arrival on April 3 in the English west-coast port of Liverpool, Private Fitzgerald's Draft was transported to the large Canadian Military establishment at Bramshott in the southern county of Hampshire. There on the next day, April 4, the 5<sup>th</sup> Draft was absorbed into the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian (*Reserve*) Battalion to complete the regulation minimum of fourteen weeks of training.



(Right above: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

That instruction completed, Private Fitzgerald was deemed as *fit for duty on active service* and was despatched to the Continent. To that end, he and his comrades-in-arms were transferred, at least on paper, to the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*British Columbia*) which had already been serving on the Western Front with the Canadian 4<sup>th</sup> Division since August of 1916.

(continued)



The detachment was then transferred by ship on August 18, likely through Southampton and the French port-city of Le Havre, and was ordered to proceed to the Canadian Infantry Base Depot recently established in the vicinity of the French coastal town of Étaples. This Private Fitzgerald did – altogether some eight-hundred eighteen reinforcements reported to the Depot on that same day – on August 20.

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



On August 23\* perhaps at least some of the new arrivals were forwarded to the nearby Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp where orders were awaited to join their new unit.

*\*Private Fitzgerald's papers record this date, August 23: the Base Depot War Diary says not. Perhaps it was on the 24<sup>th</sup> when reinforcement drafts totalling three-thousand fifteen personnel were sent on their way to join various units.*

By the time that Private Fitzgerald's draft was despatched to join his new unit three – or four - days later, however, the *new unit* in question was no longer the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion: the authorities had apparently by this time seen fit to attach him to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*New Ontario*) which was at that time in the process of completing a tour in the line and which, on August 26, had then been billeted in huts behind the forward area, in the vicinity of the village of Étrun, some kilometres to the west of Arras.

Private Fitzgerald's documents and the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary are in contradiction over the date of his arrival *to duty*: the former have him reporting to the unit on August 27. This is not impossible: the Battalion was fighting in the forward area on that day and it may well be that the reinforcement draft reported to the Battalion personnel remaining in the rear area; they would likely have ordered the new-comers to remain there, out of the way for the moment. On the other hand, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, two days later, the unit had by then been relieved, had withdrawn from the front, and the War Diarist had recorded the arrival of a draft of sixty-three *other ranks* from Base Depot.

Maybe *that* was Private Fitzgerald's draft.

\* \* \* \* \*

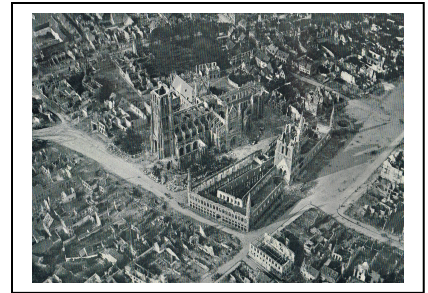
The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*New Ontario*) was a component of the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The Battalion had been one of the later units to join the Division, which had officially come into being on the Continent at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. In the case of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, it had not arrived at Le Havre from England until February 20, 1916, to disembark there on the 21<sup>st</sup>. The unit had then entrained at three-thirty in the afternoon on that same day, to arrive at the Belgian town of Poperinghe forty-eight hours later.

Since their arrival from the United Kingdom to the Continent and to the Western Front, a presence which had commenced in February of 1915, all of the Canadian forces had served for the most part in Belgium, either in the *Ypres Salient* or in the sector south of the city of Ypres which led towards and crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier.



*(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 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had four months to wait before its first major altercation with the German Army although it had incurred the usual steady toll of casualties, for the most part due to enemy artillery fire and sniping. At first posted to the sector south of Ypres, at the end of March it had been transferred with the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to serve in the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres on the Western Front of the entire Great War.



During the months March, April and May of 1916 the Battalion personnel had gradually become acclimatized to the myriad rigours and routines 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 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)*

The first significant infantry action to involve mainly the as-yet untested Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was to come about on June 2 of that year. Although other units had subsequently played a role, it was nevertheless to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division which was predominantly involved.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British (and in this case, Canadian) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.



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



The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was a costly disaster for the Canadians.



(Right above: *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 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had moved forward from reserve on that June 2 to play a role in the counter-strike and had suffered for it. The subsequent heavy artillery bombardments – including *friendly* Canadian fire – had also caused losses over the next three days. Even the retirement into support positions had been costly.



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

On the night of June 12-13 the Canadian infantry again counter-attacked, on this occasion better prepared and also better served by its artillery. The Battalion played not only its role in this action but then was ordered to remain *in situ* for the following twelve hours – many of the men having already been on their feet for the preceding two days. It retired in the late afternoon on that same June 13.



(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature.* – photograph from 2014)

After eleven days of fighting the two sides – apart from a small German gain at *Hooge* – found themselves in almost the very same positions from which they had started. The War Diarist recorded that, for the two-week period of July 1 to 15, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had incurred a total of two-hundred eighty-four casualties.

After the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion again resumed the daily duties of trench warfare, the situation remaining thus until the final week of August. After the exertions of those eleven days in June, infantry activity was on a local level and limited to patrols and raids, and casualties were once again mostly due to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers. At times the War Diarist was even tempted to employ vocabulary such as *quiet* and *slight* in his entry of the day although this was, of course, not *always* true and, as usual, everything was relative.



By August 27 the unit had moved west to Steenvoorde, just on the French side of the border with Belgium, for ten days of intense training. It was not to return to the *Ypres Salient* again for some fifteen months. On September 7 it began to relocate to the south – by bus, by train and on foot – to the area of the ongoing British offensive of that summer of 1916, *the Somme*.

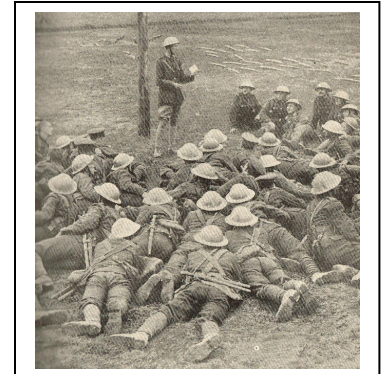
By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day of *1<sup>st</sup> 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 *1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment* which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.



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

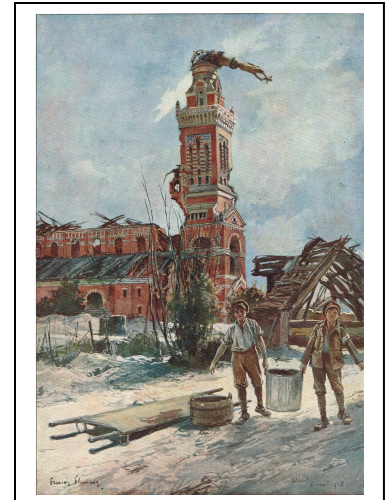
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their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

One week after having left the northern-France training area, the *52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion* marched into *Brickfields Camp (la Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

Later that day, September 14, the Commanding Officer received an Operational Order... *in which tomorrow the Canadian Corps will attack. The 3<sup>rd</sup>. Can. Div. has two objectives (1) to protect the left flank of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division by occupying the German front line... (2) To raid the German trenches in the neighbourhood of MOQUET FARM. 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade to carry out the above operation. 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Can. Inf. Bdes. in Corps Reserve ready to move off at short notice.* (Excerpt from *52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary*).



(continued)



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

In fact, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion did not become involved in the fighting until two days later, on September 16. After two further days in the front area it was relieved and withdrawn - but remained well within range of the enemy guns.

Casualty numbers for the entire period appear to be sketchy but on the 16<sup>th</sup> alone, and not having reached its objective – which it was *never* to do – the unit had incurred some two-hundred fifty-five casualties just while...*crossing the open country to our present position* (War Diary).

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

Almost every succeeding day in the front and support positions saw further losses, although not on the same scale. When in reserve the unit inevitably was ordered to provide carrying-parties and working-parties. But that first large-scale attack was also to be the last that the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was called upon to make and on October 12 it began to withdraw from the area entirely.



(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

The unit was to transfer on foot in a semi-circular fashion from *the Somme*, in a westerly direction, then northwards past Arras and beyond, to finish thirteen days later in the vicinity of the community of Maroeuil, to the north-west of the fore-mentioned city of Arras.



*\*Some of this time the Battalion spent in the Thelus Sector, on the southern downhill slope of a certain Vimy Ridge.*

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



The late autumn of that 1916 and the winter that followed was, for the Canadian infantry, 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.

(continued)

Many of the units were withdrawn in rotation to rest – but also to train – in the rear areas of the sectors which stretched from Béthune in the north to Arras in the south, this being the part of the front for which the Canadians since 1<sup>st</sup> Somme had become responsible.

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



In the middle of the month of March the Battalion was withdrawn to the rear to undergo two weeks of intensive training for an impending British offensive. On April 1 it began a six-day tour in the front line – and raided the German positions opposite on the nights of April 3 and 4 - before retiring two days later again. On this occasion it was now to take its place in readiness in Divisional Reserve – *prepared to move at one hour's notice* - to deliver an assault on the German lines.

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

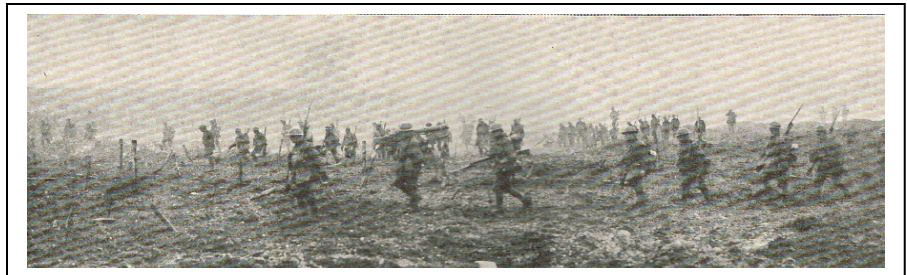


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Right above: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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 – there was even a British brigade under Canadian command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> 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*)



The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, however, was not to play an active role on either the first or on the second day of the campaign. The unit was ordered forward from its assembly area of Woodman Camp on April 11 to relieve - on April 13, two days later again - other units which were already in position, and then to push out patrols.



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

There had been, on those first two days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous days' successes had proved logistically impossible. By April 11, the Germans had succeeded in damming the breach and the conflict once more was reverting to one of inertia.

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

The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days – in fact, the fighting at Vimy Ridge was the exception to the rule - and by the end of that period little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success. A few kilometres of cratered ground had changed hands.



By the beginning of June, much of the Canadian Corps had been transferred to sectors just to the north of the recent fighting, from the area of Neuville St-Vaast as far north as Béthune. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion itself had remained for much of the month of June in the area of Vimy. After the efforts of that campaign, units were being reinforced, re-organized and were undergoing further training in areas to the rear. This relative calm was to last until the middle of August.

The British High Command had long before this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered that operations take place in the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be major contributors to this effort.

(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)



*(Preceding page: Canadian troops in the Lens Sector advancing under shell-fire across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)*

Once more, however, the services of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were not called upon for a major engagement, on this occasion because it was the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions which had been handed responsibility for the taking of *Hill 70*.

*(Right: A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)*

*\*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.*

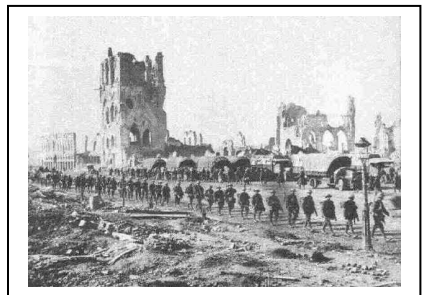
*(Right above: This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914)*



The Canadian-led operations in the Lens-Béthune Sector had still been incomplete towards the end of August when the British High Command decided to cancel any further actions there other than defensive ones\*. Things were not going altogether as planned in that summer campaign further north and the British were becoming short of men. The Australians, the New Zealanders and the Canadians were about to be called upon to remedy that shortage.

*\*This did not, however, preclude raids – still encouraged - on enemy positions such as the one undertaken by the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the suburbs of the mining centre and city of Lens on the night of September 3-4. While an enemy trench had been taken, it had cost the unit some one-hundred casualties all told to do so.*

The Lens-Béthune campaign thus having been drawn to a close, it was to be only some six weeks hence that the Canadians were ordered to join the ongoing battle in Belgium, to the north-east of Ypres. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that ostensibly was one of the British Army's objectives.



*(Right above: 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)*

(continued)





From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray - after the *Anzacs*\* - it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which had spear-headed 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 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division finally entering the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

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

*\*The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps*

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had begun its move into Belgium on October 11, halting at Cæstre, several kilometres south of the Franco-Belgian frontier, on the 15<sup>th</sup>. On October 21 and 22 the transfer had continued, the unit – in fact the entire 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade – being taken by train to the outskirts of the embattled medieval city of Ypres. From there the Battalion had moved in reserve to “X” Camp, in the vicinity of St-Jean.

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

On October 26 the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion playing its role - attacked German positions where, for a while, it was believed to have succeeded with ease in taking its objectives. These enemy positions eventually were taken and a large number of prisoners and their weapons – particularly machine-guns – captured. Casualties, however, proved to be greater than at first thought, some six hundred by the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, and it had not been easy at all.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)

After having retired back to Camp “X” the Battalion was ordered forward on one final occasion. But by then it was units of the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions which were spear-heading the operations and while the 52<sup>nd</sup> was for some days in the front lines and had to repulse a German counter-attack, it was not to be called upon to again take the offensive.

On November 13 it withdrew from the front; on the 15<sup>th</sup> the unit began to retire entirely from *Passchendaele* and from Belgium itself. By the end of the month it was resting in or near the French community of Febvin-Palfart, to the south of the larger centre of St-Omer.

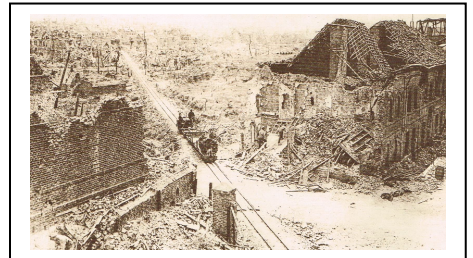
And it was there, towards the end of the first week of December, 1917, that the troops began to prepare themselves for voting. It was time for the Canadian federal election.



The first three weeks of the month of December had been spent in much the same area, the unit then having been ordered further forward, to positions at Noeux-les-Mines and at Les Brébis, both in the area of Canadian responsibility; January and February had then seen the Battalion move further south to the areas of Avion and Liévin before being withdrawn for almost a month to Lozingshem.

In March the unit had moved closer to the city of Arras, to the Méricourt Sector. Surprisingly, there appears to be little sense of urgency in the War Diary entries of the day, not even towards the end of that month. The term *surprisingly* is apt because perhaps not many people – apparently including the Battalion War Diarist - realize how close the Germans came to victory in that March and April of 1918.

Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans were to launch a massive attack, designated as Operation ‘*Michael*’, on March 21. 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 there.



(Right above: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they did bombard 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 German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

*\*A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, 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*)

The War Diary suggests, however, that the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was in no way affected by either of these German incursions. The unit remained in the area of Lens – undertaking a large raid on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March – until the first week of May when it withdrew, once again to the vicinity of Lozingshem.

Thus a relative calm descended on the front as the German threat faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there was nothing of any military significance on either of the two fronts. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to reinforce.



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

The Allies from this point of view were a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene. An overall Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

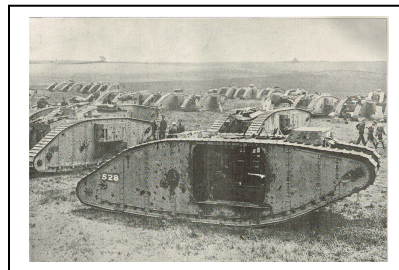
But before this time, towards the end of June, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had begun to move to the area of Neuville-Vitasse, just south-west of the city of Arras. Towards the end of the next month, July, it had then retired for training in the proximity of Berneville. On the final day of *that* month it was on its way to that part of the lines in front of Amiens, to where the German offensive had been halted in April, almost four months earlier.



The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was not alone: a large number of other Canadian units at that time had begun to move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west, then south, then east again to finish in front of the city of Amiens.

On August 4 it had encamped in the Bois de Boves and on August 6 in the Bois de Gentelles where it remained until the evening of August 7 when it moved into its jumping-off positions: the Allied attack - well supported by tanks - was to commence on the morrow morn.

(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*)



The next morning was foggy when the barrage descended upon the German defenders and it was left to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, following in immediate support of the first wave of attackers, to mop up those of the enemy who had been bypassed and had become isolated. That enemy – particularly the machine-gunners – fought hard at times but the pursuit, albeit sometimes slowed, never stopped. The Battalion continued to follow up the German retreat for six days until, on August 15-16, it was relieved.



(Right above: *A group 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 unit had reached its assigned resting-place in Beaucourt Wood, to the west of the still-occupied commune of St-Quentin by nine o'clock on the morning of that August 16. On the 18<sup>th</sup> the Battalion personnel boarded busses and, once again by a semi-circular route, began the return journey to the area of Arras.

At Bouquemaison, forty kilometres to the north of Amiens, it began to march, a trek which was to continue until August 25 when the unit reached a military encampment, "Y" Huts, near to the village of Étrun.

It was there and then that Private Fitzgerald reported *to duty* on either August 27 or 29.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Hundred Days* offensive still had much of its course to run; it was to be more than another two months before the Armistice of November 11 was to come into effect. The Germans, while not now the force that they had been even six months previously, were still to fight hard - as the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had just found out.

Having returned to the Arras Front, the unit had been in action once more for a further two days, August 27 and 28, as part of Foch's strategy to strike often and wherever possible. Nevertheless, it had incurred a total of one-hundred eighty-five *killed, wounded and missing*.

(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*)



On September 2, 1918, the unit moved into *advanced positions* to the north of the Arras-Cambrai road, in reserve for the next offensive. However, *this* advance, at first almost totally successful, was then to come about at a slower cadence than had been planned and life reverted to the well-known routines of trench warfare for the following nine days before the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was withdrawn to the rear area. On September 24 it began its return to the forward area.

On September 27 the Battalion arrived by train from reserve positions and marched to the vicinity of Cagnicourt. There... *about 11.00 A.M. the Battalion received orders to move forward. The Canadian Corps had launched its attack at 5.00 o'clock in the morning with the object of crossing the CANAL DU NORD and pressing on to CAMBRAI...* (War Diary).



(Right above: *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*)

(continued)



By two o'clock on that same afternoon the Canadian 4<sup>th</sup> Division had crossed the Canal du Nord, had taken Bourslon Wood, and was advancing beyond. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to move forward to pass through the forward troops to keep the pressure on\*.

*\*Two days later, on September 29, the British – the Royal Newfoundland Regiment by that time a Battalion of the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Infantry Division - the French and the Belgians struck at Ypres.*

(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*)

(Right: *Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bourslon Wood – photograph from 2016*)



Such, however, was the success of the Canadian-led offensive on that day that it was the following morning before Private Fitzgerald and his comrades-in-arms of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion caught up with the forward wave of troops and moved into their assembly areas. The attack began well and progress was made but then, as often happened, German machine-guns brought the whole thing to a standstill. Repeated attempts to break through were to no avail and more than two-hundred fifty casualties were incurred.

It was only on September 29 and 30 that the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to make any headway when, in co-ordination with other units, it reached its objectives by noon on the latter date. Then, on that evening, orders were received ordering a further attack to be mounted at five o'clock the following morning.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was by now operating at about fifty per cent regulation strength; however this was likely true of all the battalions involved at the time - including those in front of them wearing a field-grey uniform.

Once again, following a rolling barrage, what had begun well was stalled by the enemy machine-guns who exacted yet another terrible toll of about one-hundred casualties, some twenty per cent of the depleted Battalion's strength. On that evening of October 1 the unit again was relieved, as were the other battalions of the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, and retired to the area of Fontaine Notre-Dame.



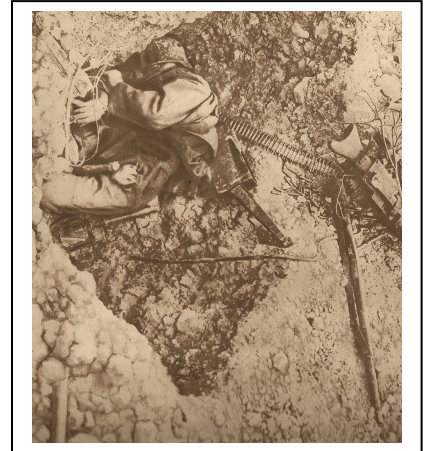
(Right above: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)

On October 21 the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, after almost three weeks away from the front, was bussed towards the northern end of the sector, away from Cambrai and towards the city of Valenciennes, but stopping short, in the vicinity of the community of Hélesmes. Apparently there the unit was feted by the local citizenry who were not only cheering and waving flags during the short journey, but who were competing with one another to offer billets to their newly-found heroes. For the Canadians, unfortunately, the party was to be short-lived... *Late at night, orders were received from Brigade that the Battalion would relieve the 14<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion in the line, next day (Battalion War Diary).*

In the commune of Raismes on that following day, October 22, Private Fitzgerald's Battalion was obliged to fight the intrepid machine-gunners once more, a task made more difficult by the well-meaning presence of members of the still-enthusiastic, still-welcoming population. The nearby railway embankment offered the Germans a strong defensive position and they were continuing to mount a determined resistance when the Battalion was relieved on October 26.

(Right: *A German machine-gunner who fought to the last – from Illustration*)



The relief was short-lived on this occasion for the Battalion which then relieved in its turn the Canadian 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion only two days afterwards, on October 28. Two days later again, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was replaced by the 4<sup>th</sup> C.M.R.\* Battalion and moved into billets in Arenberg where it remained for the following six days.

*\*Canadian Mounted Rifles, no longer with their mounts which they had relinquished by the end of December of 1915.*

Private Fitzgerald's unit marched out of Arenberg on November 6 and by November 8, having crossed the Escaut River, had stopped in Onnaing, a short distance from the frontier with Belgium. By the end of the following day it had crossed that border and had established itself in the Belgian Community of Thulin where another large crowd, also in festive spirits, had welcomed the Canadians.

The War Diary goes on to suggest - was it to do so? - that on November 10 the Battalion then made a three-hour march to the community of Wasmuel, close to the city of Mons, where the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Brigade was, on the morrow – the ultimate day of hostilities - to deliver its controversial final attack of the Great War.

At five o'clock on the following morning an armistice was signed; six hours later, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, it came into effect.

*News was received about 0900 hours that hostilities would cease at 1100 hours. The Bands at once turned out and paraded around the town, accompanied by a large crowd of civilians singing and waving flags. The Battalion moved off at 1430 hours and proceeded...to MONS and was billeted in the Cavalry Barracks... (Excerpt from the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for November 11, 1918)*



(Right: *Rejoicing in the streets of Paris on November 11 at the news of the Armistice* – from *le Miroir*)

The shooting, of course, had stopped, as had the thunder of the guns. But daily training continued – it was, after all, only an armistice, not a capitulation – as did inspections and, perhaps now more often than before, visits from the upper ranks. So also continued church parades and ordinary parades and parades to award the now-dwindling number of awarded military decorations.



During the months of November and December the Battalion slowly made its way in an easterly direction and past the southern outskirts of Brussels, the Belgian capital. For a while one might have supposed that it was following the remnants of the German Army back to the fatherland, there to play a role in the Allied Army of Occupation.

But at the end of December the unit turned ninety degrees towards the south and, for the entire month of January, remained in the area of Blandain, close to Tournai in the French-speaking part of the Kingdom of Belgium.

(Right below: *Almost a century on, market-day in the Belgian city of Tournai (Doornik)* – photograph from 2014)

On February 4 it became known to the troops that the unit was to move back to France, to the area of Le Havre, for its embarkation to return to the United Kingdom.

The Battalion thus boarded a train, leaving Blandain at two o'clock on the afternoon of February 5 and arrived at its destination two days following, during the cold and snowy morning of February 7.



Private Fitzgerald and his fellow soldiers took passage to southern England on the evening of February 10, landing in the south-coast port of Weymouth at four in the afternoon of the next day. The night then having been spent at a nearby military camp, the Battalion boarded a train to take it to the Canadian military establishment at Bramshott. From there the first to be returned home – mostly for medical reasons – were despatched two days later, on February 14; a further group of some three-hundred fifty-five were given leave to visit London.

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

The problem now arose of what to do for the next number of – at least – weeks, with a Battalion of under-employed young men.



(continued)

Sports were organized, thorough medical check-ups undergone – Private Fitzgerald’s was undergone towards the end of February with nothing untoward being reported – educational courses and lectures offered, social events on a necessarily limited scale, and precautions undertaken against the current - and lethal - Spanish ‘flu epidemic.

The men were divided into groups for their return to Canada. Some comprised men from a particular area of the country; combat troops were in separate groups – and camps – from service troops; Currie\* wanted troops to travel as units; and there was a quarter of a million of those troops to repatriate.

*\*Sir Arthur Currie, by 1918 Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps*

Private Fitzgerald was attached to “A” Wing CCC\* on March 13, a month after arriving at Bramshott, one of forty-two (Brigade Diary has *eighty-seven*) officers and *other ranks* to be thus designated at the camp. He is then recorded on March 16 on a list *a propos* the... *embarkation state of Battalion proceeding to Dispersal Camp in Canada...*

*\*Since each soldier had the right to choose his own destination in Canada, the country had been divided into twenty-two Dispersal Areas. Troops arriving back in Great Britain after service on the Continent, as well as those who had served in Great Britain itself, were usually despatched to large centres – such as Bramshott – and then sub-divided into smaller groups, each with a letter-code – Private Fitzgerald’s “A”, for example - to match that of one of the Dispersal Areas back home. Upon arrival by ship, the returnees could thus be more efficiently sent to the appropriate location.*

For a number of reasons, the number of troop repatriations to Canada in the month of February, 1919, had totalled just over fifteen thousand. One of the reasons was a lack of appropriate shipping – a problem which was partly solved by once more requisitioning the White Star Liner *Olympic*\* to be used for that purpose\*\*. Matters improved and in March the number of those returning to Canada rose to fifty thousand.

*\*Sister ship of Britannic, sunk in the Mediterranean in November of 1916 while serving as a hospital ship, and also of the ill-starred Titanic, she was capable of carrying well over six-thousand troops on a single crossing – and on many occasions had already done so.*

*\*\*Preferential treatment and priority had apparently been given to returning American troops, the use of Olympic for repatriation purposes being one example.*



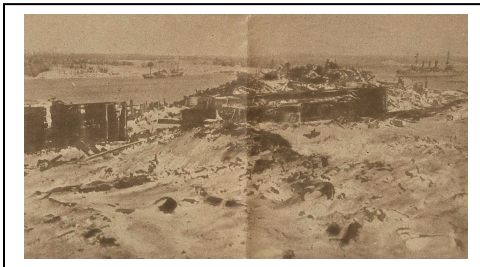
*(Right above: The photograph of Olympic, shown here in her war-time dazzle camouflage, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

Thus it was on board *Olympic* that Private Fitzgerald took passage to Halifax\*, the vessel departing Southampton on March 17, to berth in the harbour there seven days later. There were personnel from at least nine Canadian units other than the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion travelling on this occasion.



***\*Another factor in the at-first slow rate of repatriation was the almost complete destruction of Halifax and its harbour facilities in the great explosion of December 6, 1917.***

***(Right: This is part of downtown Halifax days after the catastrophe. The Imo, one of the ships directly involved is to be seen beached on the opposite side of the harbour. Apparently, according to the caption on the original picture, the heap of wreckage in the middle represents much of what remained of the Mont Blanc. – from Illustration)***



**Private Fitzgerald is next recorded as having been discharged at the 2<sup>nd</sup> District Depot in Toronto on March 28, 1919.**

**Two documents in Private Fitzgerald's papers record the date on which he was officially awarded the Military Medal: unfortunately they contradict each other - February 8, 1919 and August 2, 1919. And whereas the Battalion War Diarist has scrupulously recorded the citation for a great number of the recipients of decorations, this appears not to be so in Private Fitzgerald's case.**



***His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Military Medal for bravery in the field to the under-mentioned Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men:-***

***2356424 Pte. Fitzgerald J., 52<sup>nd</sup> Bn., Manitoba R.***

**(London Gazette 31430, Supplement of 3/7/19)**

**Among his discharge papers is one on which Private Fitzgerald has written – and signed – a declaration of his intention to return to live in Cleveland, Ohio. He apparently then changed his mind, crossed out the given address, and substituted for it the name and address of his father, by then residing at Ochre Pit Cove, Newfoundland.**

**But if he *did* return to Newfoundland at that time, then he must have left again shortly thereafter because he is recorded as having crossed from Canada into the United States at Port Huron, Michigan, in November of 1919, once more declaring his intended destination as Cleveland, Ohio. And *if* he crossed into the United States at that time, then he must have returned to Canada again within the next nine months, because that is where he died.**

**The son of Bernard Fitzgerald, fisherman – to whom he had allotted fifteen dollars per month from his pay (1/10/18 to 1/3/19) and of Cecelia Fitzgerald (née *Travers*) of Western Bay Newfoundland, he was also brother to Sarah, to John, to Mary, Patrick, Bridget and to Edward.**

**James Fitzgerald was reported as having died of a *pulmonary abscess* in Speedwell Hospital\* in Guelph-Wellington, Ontario, on August 23, 1920. While his headstone is not a Commonwealth Grave Headstone – perhaps a family decision – the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has recorded his as a war death.**

***\*The name this institution is engraved on his headstone; the building apparently later became a part of the Ontario Reformatory/ Guelph Correctional Centre.***

James Fitzgerald had enlisted at the apparent age of thirty-two years and six months: date of birth – from his attestation paper – in Western Bay, Newfoundland, August 15, 1885. Parish records apparently give the year as 1886.

Private James Fitzgerald 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 27, 2023.

