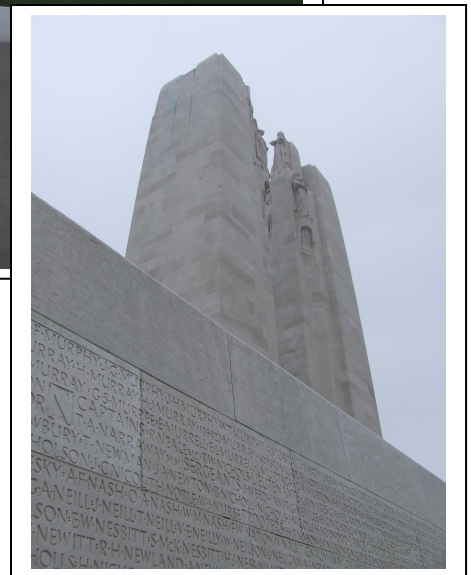
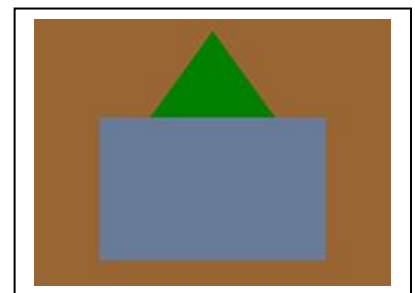




Private John Hiscock (Number 418242) of the 42nd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of shoulder flash of the 42nd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)



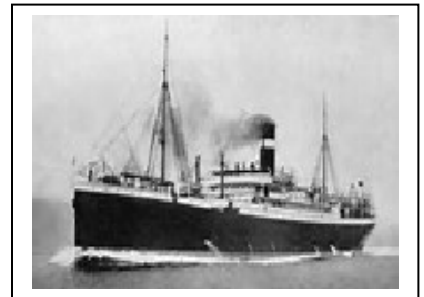
(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *machinist*, John Hiscock appears to have left behind him no details of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Québec. All that may be said for certain is that he is documented as being in the city of Montréal during the month of March, 1915 - for that is where and when he enlisted.

It may well be that John Hiscock went through all the formalities of enlistment on a single day: On March 4 he presented himself for a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force* – then enlisted, underwent attestation and was officially *taken on strength* – posted to “D” Company - by the 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*)* whose soon-to-be commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel George S. Cantlie, then declared (on paper) that...*John Hiscock...having been finally approved and inspected by me...I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.* This final paper was left un-dated.

Given that the 42nd Battalion mobilized and recruited in Montreal – and later sailed from there for overseas – it is likely - but to be confirmed - that this is also where Private Hiscock and his fellow recruits trained until their departure in June of that 1915.

The vessel onto which the ten officers and nine-hundred seventy-eight *other ranks* of the 42nd Battalion embarked on June 10 was His Majesty’s Transport *Hesperian*.



Also taking passage overseas to the United Kingdom on board the ship were the 1st Drafts of the 8th Canadian Mounted Rifles, of the 13th Canadian Mounted Rifles and also of the 37th Battalion of Canadian Infantry.

(Right above: *The photograph of the Allan Line vessel Hesperian is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Not long after transporting Private Hiscock across the Atlantic ocean, she was torpedoed off Ireland – on September 4, 1915 – to sink two days later. Thirty-two lives were lost.*)

Hesperian sailed on that same date, to dock nine days later, on June 19, in the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport. From there the unit was transferred by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, then being established on the coast of the county of Kent.



(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*)

The complex comprised a number of subsidiary camps, the entirety designated as *Shorncliffe*. It was situated on the Dover Straits, in the close vicinity of the English Channel town and harbour of Folkestone through which a large number of Canadian Expeditionary Force units passed during the *Great War* on the way to the Continent and to the *Western Front* after having undergone a period of training*.

Private Hiscock and the 42nd Battalion were no exceptions to the rule. After a likely few days of quarantine – officially for all newcomers from Canada – and the regulation fourteen weeks of training before being pronounced as prepared for *active service*, the 42nd Battalion marched to the pier at nearby Folkestone on October 9 of 1915 and embarked for the short Channel-crossing to the port of Boulogne on the far coast.



(Right top: A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009)

(Right below: An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The 42nd Battalion of the Canadian Infantry was a unit of the 7th Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 3rd Canadian Division, of which four such formations were to serve on the *Western Front* during the *Great War*. However, neither the Brigade* nor the Division was to officially come into being until the midnight of December 31, 1915 – January 1st, 1916.

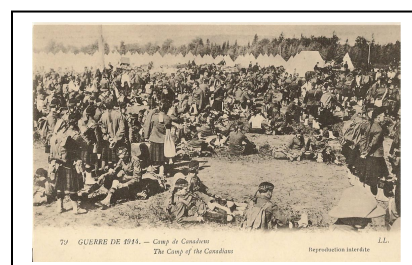


(Right: The personnel of the Battalion wore a *Black Watch* tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the *canadiansoldiers.com* web-site)



*The other battalions of the 7th Brigade were the 49th (Edmonton Regiment), the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) and the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment).

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



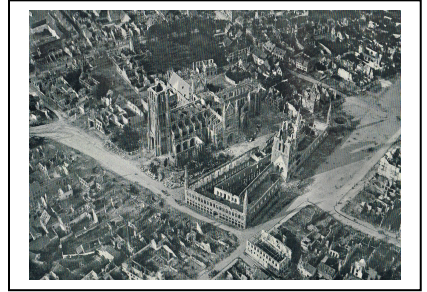
In the winter of 1915-1916 and into the spring and summer of 1916, the Battalion served in Belgium, at first just to the north of the Franco-Belgian frontier in co-operation with the Canadian 1st Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, and then, as of March and April, 1916, in the *Ypres Salient* where it was responsible for an area to the south-east.

(Right: While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card)



(continued)

(Right: 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 first five months of Private Hiscock's Battalion's service on the Continent had therefore comprised the day-by-day drudgery and dangers of the routines and rigours of trench warfare during the *Great War*.*.

***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 the year 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)

The first major altercation in which the 42nd Battalion and Private Hiscock were to play a role was the confrontation between the Canadian 3rd Division – and other Canadian Corps units - and the Kaiser's Army, fought in June of 1916 at and about *Mount Sorrel*.

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) 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*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time 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 successfully patched up their defences.

(continued)

The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, however, delivered piece-meal, poorly co-ordinated, and poorly supported by the artillery, was to prove a most costly experience for the Canadians.

(Right: 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)



The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, of which the 42nd Battalion was a component, was to be in the thick of it all. Excerpts from its War Diary take up the story:

2nd to 6th June – On the morning of the 2nd the enemy opened up a severe bombardment on our front, support and communicating trenches, commencing at 7.45 a.m. and keeping up an intense fire until noon when he launched an attack against our trenches. The artillery preparation had been so severe that he succeeded in penetrating our trenches and by evening of that day he was in possession of a good deal of our front and support trenches...

Counter attacks were made and succeeded in driving the enemy out of a portion of our trenches but owing to the difficulties of getting up reinforcements were unable to hold the ground recovered... The casualties suffered during the engagement were somewhat heavy in both officers and men...

The 42nd Battalion incurred a total of two-hundred seventy-eight casualties up until the night of June 5-6 when the entire 7th Brigade was withdrawn. Neither the Brigade nor the Battalion was to play any further part in the affair. On the night of June 12-13 the Canadians organized and then delivered what proved to be a final – and successful – counter-attack. After eleven days of fighting, the two sides had ended up for the most part where they had started.



(Right above: Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014)

(Right: Hill 60 as it remains almost a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooze, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: Still nursing the scars of a hundred years ago, it is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)



From then until the end of August would be a quiet time for the Canadians – as quiet as it ever became in the *Ypres Salient*: there was to be no further concerted infantry activity by either side, only patrols and raids on a local scale. The daily toll of casualties was to be mostly due to enemy artillery and snipers.

On August 22, the 7th Brigade retired to rest billets in the Cassel area; but there was to be little rest involved. The following two weeks were then spent in training in preparation for service in a different theatre. The Canadians were about to move south to *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 which was to cost 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 *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been comprised of troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

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



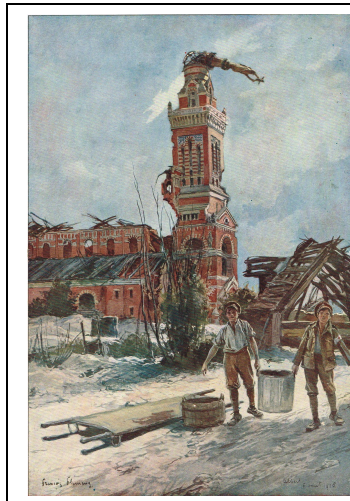
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), and then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23), before the Canadians had entered the fray on or about August 30 to become part of a third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

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



In the mean-time, having left the north of France on the morning of September 7, the 42nd Battalion had arrived by train and by foot on September 13 at the large military encampment which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

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



(continued)

On the morning of September 15 the Battalion had still been at *Brickfields Camp*. By the late afternoon it had moved forward into its assembly area and then into its jumping-off positions. The unit's attack on Courcelette was to go in at six o'clock that evening.

The following is an excerpt from 42nd Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916:

ATTACK *The position of assembly was reached and all in readiness for the attack at 5.50 pm. The attacking companies went over the top at exactly zero hour.*

OBJECTIVES *The first objective SUNKEN ROAD was reached – also the 2nd i.e. FABECK GRABEN TRENCH without heavy casualties, and immediately steps were taken to clear the trench, reverse the parapet and consolidate...*

This operation undertaken by the 42nd Battalion on the 15th was one of the few that were to be termed as successful on that day. The continuation of the attack on the morrow was less so: total casualties for the two days were to be seventy-four *killed in action*, two-hundred ninety-eight *wounded in action*, sixty-six *missing in action*.

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



The following information, all that is to be gleaned from the 42nd Battalion War Diary entry of September 15, tells what little is recorded of Private Hiscock's "D" Company on that day: Before the attack, "D" Company, under the command of Lieutenant J.A. Mathewson, had been in reserve and by that evening had moved forward to *Sunken Road* from which the next day's assault was to be launched.



(Right above: *The cemeteries named for the area on which it stands: Sunken Road, Contalmaison – photograph from 1017*)

The son of Thomas Hiscock, fisherman, and of Mary Hiscock of Trinity, Newfoundland, he was likely brother to a twin, Patience and Sarah-Elizabeth, three years his elders. Sadly, little other information of this ilk appears to be available.

Private Hiscock was reported as having been *killed in action* on Friday, September 15, 1916 during the fighting near the village of Courcelette.



(Right above: *The village of Courcelette, seen from the north, just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

(continued)

John Hiscock had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years and six months: date of birth in Trinity, Newfoundland, August 6, 1895 (from attestation papers); however, the Newfoundland Register of Births, while confirming Trinity, cites July 26 of the same year as the date.

Private John Hiscock was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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 24, 2023.