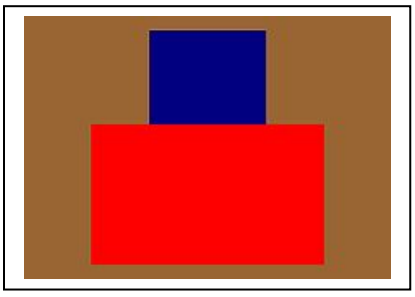
Private Albert Kirby (Number 737186) of the 16th Battalion (*Canadian Scottish*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in the Fort Massey Military Cemetery in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia – Grave reference: SE.G.19..



(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) of the C.E.F. is from the Wikipedia web-site*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *fisherman*, Albert Kirby appears to have left behind no history of his early years in the small community of Kirby's Cove, Dominion of Newfoundland*, nor of his movement from there to Canada. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was in the town of Lethbridge, Alberta, during the month of August of the year 1916, for that was where and when he enlisted.

According to his first pay records, August 29, 1916, was the day on which Private Kirby began to be remunerated for his services to the 113th Canadian Overseas Battalion. It was also on that day, presumably in the same venue, that Albert Kirby was to undergo a medical examination which pronounced him to be…*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force.*

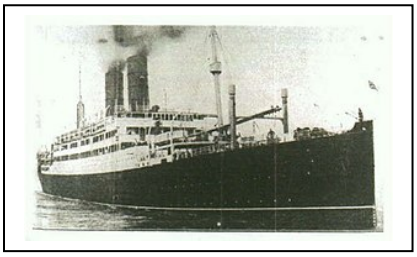
Attestation was undergone on that same date again, his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace, at which time he was…*taken on strength…*by the above-named 113th Canadian Overseas Battalion (*Lethbridge Highlanders*).

The formalities of enlistment were then brought to a conclusion when the commanding Officer of the 113th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel A.W. Pryce-Jones, declared, on paper, that…*Albert Kirby…Having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

August 29, 1916, had been a busy day for Private Kirby but his initiation would not yet have been finished: Since May of that 1916 his new unit had been in training at the newly-established *Sarcee Camp* in the vicinity of Calgary and would continue to do so into the month of September of that year. Exactly on which date he was to report there is not clear but it was likely to have been very soon after his enlistment*.

There he made a Will which was then apparently to be lost and which had to be re-written some two months later, after his arrival in England.

Then it was to be on or about September 19, some three weeks after enlistment, that the 113th Battalion began the train journey across three quarters of the continent to the east-coast city and harbour of Halifax. There, having embarked on September 25, Private Kirby's unit sailed two days later on board His Majesty's Transport *Tuscania* for what may have been her first ocean-crossing as a requisitioned troop-carrier.



(Right above: *The 1914 image of a newly-built and launched 'Tuscania' – for the Anchor (Cunard) Line - is from the Wikipedia web-site. For the first two years of the conflict she continued to ply her commercial route between Glasgow and New York. Requisitioned to carry troops in September of 1916, seventeen months later, on February 2, 1918, the vessel was torpedoed while transporting American troops, of whom some two hundred were lost. 'Tuscania' sank in about four hours*.)

Private Kirby's 113th Battalion was not to travel alone: also taking passage on the vessel to the United Kingdom were three other military units, the 111th and 145th Canadian Infantry Battalions as well the 7th Draft of the Number 2 Training Depot of the Canadian Army Service Corps.

Tuscania **sailed on September 27 and nine days later, on October 6, docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. From there the Battalion was transported – perhaps on the morrow - by train south-eastward across the country to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, established by that time in the county of Kent and in the vicinity of the harbour and sea-side town of Folkestone. There the unit was to spend at least the next two days in the subsidiary camp at East Sandling.**

Then on October 8, the entire 113th Battalion was transferred administratively to the Canadian 17th Reserve Battalion as well as physically to another major Canadian encampment sited at Bramshott – *Camp Bramshott* adopting the name of a nearby village - in the southern English county of Hampshire.

(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)

Like many of the other Canadian Infantry Battalions which were to disembark in the United Kingdom during the *Great War*, the personnel of the 113th Battalion – now 17th Reserve Battalion - was to be employed to re-enforce other Canadian units which by that time were already serving on the Continent.

(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)

Before the end of the Great War, Canada would have dispatched overseas more than two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were to be below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had aspirations of seeing active service in a theatre of war.

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and these were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

Having spent but a mere month in training at *Bramshott*, Private Kirby and certain of his comrades-in-arms of the 17th Reserve Battalion were now to be summoned to…*active service*…and dispatched as a re-enforcement draft to France.

Private Kirby and his draft travelled to France on or about the night of December 11-12, 1916. Having been transported via the English south-coast port-city of Southampton, from where the unit had crossed the English Channel to the industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine, he then reported to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles – in close proximity to the afore-mentioned Le Havre.

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

On the morrow he and a number of his fellow re-enforcements were TOS (*taken on strength*) on paper by the 16th Canadian Overseas Battalion (*Canadian Scottish*) which had by then been operating on the Continent for the better part of two years.

The 16th Battalion War Diarist does not appear to have recorded any arrivals from the Base Depot either on or about November 13 of 1916 - which is the date that the draft reported to the 16th Battalion as documented in Private Kirby's own dossier; however, this lack of inclusion is not unusual. At the time the Battalion was in the rear area having retired not so long before from the cauldron that was still at the time the…*First Battle of the Somme*.

On that date the unit was at Camblain l'Abbé, just to the north-east of Arras from where, days later, it was to move to nearby Villers-au- Bois before, days later again, being ordered forward into the trenches.

*** * * * ***

Some twenty-one months before this time, the 16th Battalion, an element of the (1st) Canadian Division had embarked in the English west-coast port of Avonmouth on February 11, 1915, and had crossed from there to the port of St-Nazaire, Brittany, whence it had been transported by train towards the north. By February 17 the 16th Battalion had reached the northern French town of Armentières on the Franco-Belgian frontier where it was to spend a week. During the month which was to follow, the unit had then served in and about the *Laventie Sector* just to the south of the border town of Armentières.

Then, on the morning of April 16, after having spent several days in the area of Cassel, the unit had crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier.

It had subsequently been transported by bus into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, travelling from Steenvoorde on French territory to the village of Vlamertinghe just to the west of the Belgian city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).

(Right above: *Busses requisitioned from the public transportation system in London being used to carry troops in Belgium* – from *Illustration*)

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

(continued)

By late in the day of the same April 16th, the 16th Battalion, having skirted on foot to the west and north the ruins of Ypres, had occupied trenches in the area of St-Julien (*Sint-Juliaan*), there to relieve French troops of the 79th Infantry Regiment.

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

Even the first units of the Canadian Division to have arrived there had been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for only a few short days. During this brief period of Canadian tenure *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet, with little more than the constant enemy artillery to worry about. But then the dam had burst - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, was to threaten to sweep all before it.

The date was April 22, 1915.

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

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

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

The cloud had been noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left had wavered, then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered.

Thus a retreat, not always very cohesive, had become necessary while, at the same time, the 10th Battalion, closely supported by the 16th Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Brigade had been ordered to move forward to attack the enemy late that night; this had been done but at no small cost to the Canadian attackers.

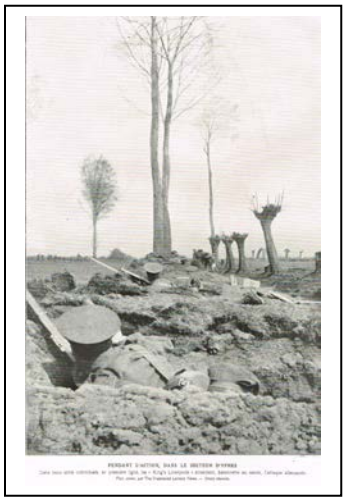
(continued)

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

By the following day, April 23, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan had held fast until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement was to become necessary.

At times there were to be breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close to a breakthrough they had come, or else they had not possessed the means of exploiting the situation.

And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.



April 25th had been spent in trenches sheltering from extremely heavy German shell-fire before the unit had been ordered to retire to the area of La Brique during that night of the 25th-26th. By now reduced to thirteen officers and some five-hundred *other ranks*, the Battalion had crossed the *Yser Canal* near La Brique; there, on the west bank of the waterway, the unit had dug in, only hours later to be ordered to the vicinity of St-Jean (*Sint-Jaan*), there to dig in once more under – once more - heavy enemy artillery fire.

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

Some forty-eight hours later, on April 28, the 16th Battalion was to be back in positions on the west bank of the *Yser Canal* having relieved the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion; then on the 29th it would be ordered back to the east bank, to construct a…*proper defensive trench.* Having done that, on April 30 the unit had supported a French attack.

By this time, perhaps unsurprisingly, the 16th Battalion War Diarist was to enter in his journal: *Troops very tired and need reorganization.*

(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion moved into defensive positions on its western bank – west is to the left* – photograph from 2014)

Yet more enemy heavy artillery fire had then rained down during the first day of May although the resulting number of casualties appears to have been relatively light. But a relief promised for that night had failed to materialize and the Battalion was therefore to remain *in situ* on the east bank of the *Yser Canal*. The relief had eventually arrived somewhat overdue at half-past two in the morning of May 4 and the unit had then been retired to the area of Vlamertinghe.

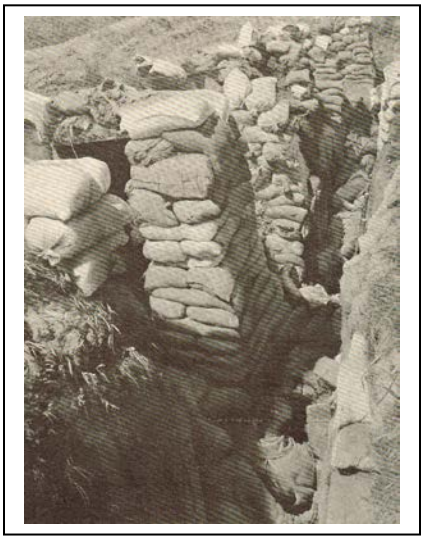
(continued)

Its trials had now been almost over…but not quite. At eight o'clock that same evening the 16th Battalion had been withdrawn from this…*Second Battle of Ypres* – to the northern French communities of Bailleul and La Maison Blanche, some twenty-five kilometres distant. After an almost seven-hour march, it had reached its billets…at a quarter to three the following morning.

(Right: *The re-built town of Bailleul almost a century after the visit there of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade: Much of the damage to be done to it would be the result of the later fighting in the spring of 1918*. – photograph from 2010.)

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

On May 14 the 16th Battalion had next been ordered to move down the line to the south, further into France to the areas of Festubert and Givenchy, and to take up billets at Quentin. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.



(Right: *A French photograph of some German trenches – complete with dead defenders and perhaps attackers - captured in the area south of Givenchy before it was to become an area of British responsibility*. – from *Illustration*)

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks had taken place during which the British High Command was to manage to gain some three kilometres of ground - but also in which to contrive to destroy, by the use of the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what had been left of the British pre-War professional Army after *Second Ypres*.

The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not able to field the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It would nonetheless suffer heavily.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert – had then fared hardly any better than had done the British; each contingent – a Division – was to have incurred over two-thousand casualties before the offensive had drawn to a close.

The French effort further south – using the same tactics - had likewise been a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed*, *wounded* and *missing*.

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

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

An attack on May 18 - only partially effected - was not to be a great success but it had been followed on the morrow by an assault on positions known collectively as *The Orchard*, although it had been called off later that same day. The operation had continued on May 20 in rather disorganized fashion, successful in places, less so in others. From that day onward, however, the final week of that month appears to have comprised little or no infantry action conducted by the 16th Battalion.

On the first day of June the Battalion had been relieved from its posting at Festubert and had moved into billets at Oblinghem; in a few days' time, on June 6, it was to be ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far-distant to the south of Festubert. Posted into the forward trenches on occasion during that month to support British efforts – and with the same results, although less numerous, from repeating the same mistakes – on or about June 24 the entire (1st) Canadian Division had begun to retire from the area.

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

During this tour at Givenchy there was to be a change made to the 16th Battalion weaponry when the Canadian-made rifles had been withdrawn from service in exchange for British standard-pattern weapons issued in their place. Eventually all Canadian units were to be using the Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle although it would take almost a year for this to happen*.

The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it jammed, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.

By the summer of 1915 the Canadian units were beginning to exchange it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

On June 26, as a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the twenty-six officers and six-hundred sixty *other ranks* of the 16th Battalion had marched to billets in or near to the community of Neuf Berquin, on the following day having continued the retirement as far as La Maison Blanche from which the unit had marched towards Festubert some six weeks earlier. It was to remain there for the following eight days.

From there on July 5 a march of three and a half hours had seen the Battalion move eastwards into Belgium, to *the Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

(Right: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector; a mine crater from the time of the June, 1917, British offensive may be seen in the foreground* – photograph from 2014)

Having reached the area of the village of Ploegsteert, there the 16th Battalion had remained – as had the entire Canadian Division. In the months that had followed it would come to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the Battalion War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

The 16th Battalion, once having arrived back in Belgium and in the…*Ploegsteert Sector…*, had found itself posted to the picturesquely-named area of…*the Piggeries*…and the nearby trenches. At that particular moment the *Sector* had been reportedly – by the Battalion War Diarist – quiet, although this had not precluded casualties, among them fatalities.

There was now to pass a full eleven months from the time of its retirement from Givenchy at the end of June, 1915, before the 16th Battalion would be involved in a further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols – had been fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers would ensure a constant flow of casualties. But by far the greatest part of that period, however, was to be spent submitting to the routines, to the rigours and to the perils of that daily grind 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*)

(continued)

In the meantime, in mid-September, the 2nd Canadian Division had disembarked at Boulogne from England and had been posted to the *St. Éloi sub-Sector* – also in Belgium – just to the north of the area held by the 1st Canadian Division. The newcomers also were now to experience several months of almost-passive trench warfare: it was not to be until the spring of 1916 that the formation would undertake its first major infantry operation.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* would officially take place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village – or the ruins thereof - some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a series of galleries underneath the German lines, there to place explosives which they would detonate on that March 27.

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down 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 had been called off, both sides were to be back where they had started some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

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

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2nd Canadian Division affair and the personnel of the 16th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the din of the German artillery – and by some heavy shelling from the same source, as the Battalion's War Diary also reports.

The next large-scale infantry confrontation to be contested between the Canadian forces and the German Army was to come about in the south-eastern area of the *Ypres Salient* where the 3rd Canadian Division had been posted. The situation, however, was rapidly to become serious enough for units other than those of the 3rd Division to soon be ordered into the fray.

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

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

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans would be unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to re-organize their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was to prove a costly experience for the Canadians.

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

On June 2 the 16th Battalion had been stationed behind the line to the south-west of Ypres but by the following morning it and the other three battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade – by then attached to the 3rd Canadian Division – had marched to the area of *Railway Dugouts* and then advanced further in the direction of *Maple Copse* and *Hill 60*. Ordered to prepare to counter-attack – later countermanded – the unit had then begun to consolidate existing defensive positions and to excavate new ones.

On June 6 the Germans were to make a further attack and the 16th Battalion had been made ready once more to counter-attack if the Germans were to manage to take *Hill 60*. In the event they had not done so, and on the night of June 7-8 the unit had been relieved.

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

On the night of June 11-12 the Battalion – in fact the entire 3rd Brigade – had been ordered moved up again, the 16th Battalion to the area of Zillebeke from which it had been relieved only days before. During the remainder of June 12 it would advance again into the forward area until just after mid-night when it had been reported to be in its assembly trenches.

The final attack of the *Mount Sorrel* operation, would be preceded by a heavy barrage courtesy of a re-organized Canadian artillery, and it had been delivered as early as one-thirty in the morning of that June 13. At eight minutes past three, some ninety minutes later, the 16th Battalion had been able to report that all its objectives had been taken and that it was already beginning to extend and consolidate them.

The unit was now to remain in place for the following twenty-three hours before then being relieved by the 10th Canadian Battalion. For the 16th Battalion the affair at *Mount Sorrel* had thereupon concluded – at a price: the attack of June 13 had resulted in a casualty list of two-hundred fifty-seven killed and wounded.

(Right below: *A century later, reminders of a violent past in close proximity 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*: *In the first week of June of 1917, a British mine was detonated under its summit, thus removing much of its resemblance to a hill.* – photograph from 2014)

During the two months which had succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things were to revert to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There had been no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity having been again limited to raids and patrols. However, this was not to preclude a lengthy casualty list at times, for the most part due to artillery-fire and snipers.

During the month of August and September the Canadian Battalions were to be gradually withdrawn from the…*Ypres Salient*…and ordered to camps for training in what had been designated as…*open warfare*. It appears that the 16th Battalion had been one of the first units to retire, having left the forward area for Brigade Support positions during the night of August 7-8. There were then to be a further five days of movement by motorized transport and by foot.

On August 13 the unit had reached the northern French community of Watten in the area of which training areas had been prepared. The British summer offensive in France had not been proceeding altogether as planned and depleted units of exhausted troops were by that time being sent north into Belgium*. Their place was, at least partially, to be taken over by the Canadians now in training.

The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment of the British 29th Division was one of those. It was stationed in Ypres itself from early August until October 8 when it was ordered to return to the Somme.

(Right: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are surely too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph on a preceding page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles (as seen above), during the late summer or early autumn of 1916* – from *The War Illustrated*)

Two weeks later, having trained – and also having played a number of baseball and football games – in the Watten area, on the night of August 27-28 the 16th Battalion was to proceed piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer. The unit had entrained there at one o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres, where it had arrived some eight hours afterwards, at nine o'clock in the morning.

From Conteville the transfer had continued for a further four days – all of it on foot but with a stop each night in fresh billets, some of which the 16th Battalion War Diarist has described in his entries as…*Best billets for ages*.

(Right: *Almost a century after the 16th Battalion passed through it on the way to the 'First Battle of the Somme', the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation* – photograph from 2015)

The trek had eventually terminated at bivouacs in *Brickfields Camp* in close vicinity to the provincial town of Albert on September 1, before the unit was then to be ordered into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

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

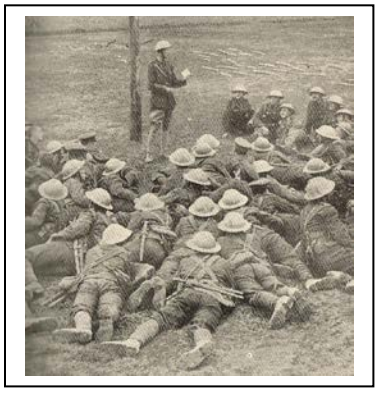
La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.

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

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

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been 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 had lost so heavily on that day at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

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), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on and about August 30 to be part of a third general offensive. Their first collective major action was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette on September 15.



(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*)

But by that last date the 16th Battalion had been in the front line for some ten days, having been sent in to relieve an Australian battalion. This first experience of *the Somme* was to last less than three days but the War Diarist had by then already recorded that*… Companies in front line suffered severely*… likely due to the very heavy shelling also recorded.

Unlike many of the other 1st Canadian Division units the 16th Battalion had not then been involved in the aforementioned general offensive of September 15. Having been withdrawn well behind the lines on September 7, on the date of the attack it had been in the process of making its way back to billets in the town of Albert where it had arrived on the 18th and where it had then remained for another six days.

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

On September 24, the 16th Battalion had received orders to supply troops for mopping-up parties in the course of a further attack, this one to be undertaken by its sister units, the 13th and 15th Battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The attack had been sent in on the 26th and the action had concluded on the night of September 27-28: *On counting casualties found that we had 116 casualties of whom 17 were killed* (Excerpt from 16th Battalion War Diary)*.*

A final assault by the 16th Battalion was now scheduled to be undertaken on October 8 in conjunction with the Canadian 13th and 3rd Battalions against the German positions known as *Regina Trench.* The Canadian assault at first had been at best only partially successful, and then German counter-attacks had driven the Canadians back in the centre, thus obliging the troops on the two flanks to withdraw.

(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the First Battle of the Somme* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

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

The 16th Battalion War Diary entry of October 8 records: *4.50 am – Barrage started – and attack followed – we gained our objective in spite of wire on our left. The Battalion on our right also succeeded – The Battalion on our left did not succeed.*

Reports received that all officers were killed or wounded except two.

(continued)

The enemy made strong counter attack and drove the battalion back on our right leaving both our flanks in the air.

We finally had to retire to our kicking off trench.

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary reported the following casualties incurred by the 16th Battalion for that day: *Estimated 300 O.R. 2 officers killed, 1 officer died of wounds, 7 officers wounded, 3 officers missing.*

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

The attack of October 8 was to be the final action undertaken by the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion during…*First Somme*. On the following day the unit had been relieved by the 1st Canadian Battalion and had withdrawn under cover of darkness late that evening into the relative shelter of the town of Albert where billets were awaiting.

There it was to spend that night, the next day and the following night again, there enjoying – one may presume – a well-earned rest.

On October 11, the 16th Battalion had begun what was to be a two-week trek northwards: at first it had marched westwards before having turned to pass through the western outskirts of the city of Arras and beyond. On October 26 the unit had finally halted in the vicinity of Camblain l'Abbé and Villers-au-Bois before then moving up into front-line positions for the next week.

(Right above: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, was used primarily by medical facilities in the area during the years 1916-1918. Today within its bounds lie over twelve-hundred Commonwealth dead – the majority Canadian – and also thirty-two former adversaries.* – photograph from 2017)

By the time of Private Kirby's arrival on or about November 13 his new unit, the 16th Battalion had effected a withdrawal and a further short tour, followed by yet another return - as seen much further above - to Camblain l'Abbé which, of course, was where Private Kirby had reported…*to duty*.

*** * * * ***

In the mean-time as the…*First Battle of the Somme*…was in the throes of drawing to its bloody conclusion – officially on or about November 15 – at the village of Beaumont, the Canadians had been withdrawing from the campaign in the same order as in which they had arrived – 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Divisions, the last of which would still be *in situ* in early December.

As the Canadian Divisions drew back, they all moved in a northerly direction into the sectors above Arras and south of the venerable town of Béthune. This was to become an area, at least partially, of Canadian responsibility for much of the remainder of the conflict with perhaps the several weeks of involvement at *Passchendaele* to be the exception.

(Preceding page: *This image is of the historic northern town of Béthune at the end of the Great War, but by the winter of 1917 its destruction was already well under way.* – from a vintage post-card)

The Canadian sectors were not a particularly quiet front; the area was France's major coal-mining region and much fierce fighting for this valuable prize had already taken place – and was to continue - on top of the coal seams and in the mining villages and towns of the area – as well as in and about the city of Lens.

(Right adjacent: *The city and mining-centre of Lens as it was by the end of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

However, at the time of the Canadians' retirement the winter of 1916-1917 was looming and any confrontations were not only few and far between, but also relatively minor in nature. Private Kirby and his Battalion, while submitting to the rigours and the routines of trench warfare during the weeks that followed – all in much the same area – were to be perturbed by little more than the perpetual discomfort of the trenches plus some sporadic shelling.

(Right above: *Cabaret Rouge – in the vicinity of where Private Kirby was serving in late 1916 – is the site of the British cemetery of the same name from which was taken the remains of an unknown Canadian soldier. Today he is honoured at the National War Memorial in Ottawa*. – photograph from 1916(?))

On December 15 Private Kirby reported sick and was admitted into an unidentified Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, there to be…*kept in bed and treated for a cold.*

On the 17th day of December of that 1916, Private Kirby was documented as having been transferred to and admitted into the 1st Canadian General Hospital in the French coastal town of Étaples. There he was diagnosed as suffering from bronchitis and from an infected larynx which was suspected of being a tubercular condition – particularly since both his parents had died from this cause.

The identity of the hospital ship on board which he returned to England on January 1 of the New Year, 1917, seems not to be noted among his papers. However, on that same January 2, Private Kirby entered the Coulter Hospital – a private house lent for the purpose - in Grovesnor Square, London, for further medical attention. At the same time he was transferred administratively from the 16th Battalion to the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre, an office which was responsible for the wounded and sick Canadians being treated in the United Kingdom*.

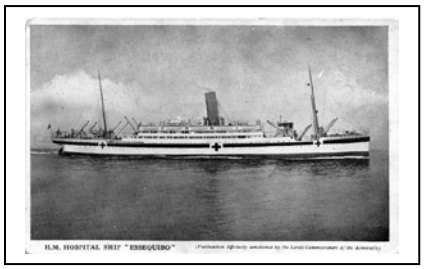
Apparently the system proved to be not very efficient and it was dissolved in 1917.

By some seven weeks later, on February 22, when Private Kirby was to be forwarded from London to the Canadian Military Hospital at Hastings on the Sussex coast, the tuberculosis had been confirmed and his condition had been deteriorating. A medical report of the time which accompanied him upon his transfer serves as a resume of the situation:

Family History positive…
Says he never had any lung trouble in Canada. Going over to France got cold, and six weeks after landing went to Hospital where he has been ever since.
He lost some weight.
Has had no night sweats, but has had a bad cough and severe laryngitis, probably tubercular.
X ray positive for TB on Feb. 20th, 1917
Has lost considerable weight

A month later Private Kirby, if not physically at least again administratively, had again changed hands and was the responsibility of the Manitoba Regimental Depot at *Shorncliffe* from where it had been decided to repatriate him as being…*medically unfit*.

The ship which was to carry him home was the *Essquibo*, a requisitioned passenger ship converted into a hospital ship and which at the end of the *Great War* was to be lent in a similar capacity – ambulance transport of convalescent soldiery - to the Canadian government.



Her first trans-Atlantic crossing as a hospital ship was to be in March of 1917, maybe having been the voyage from Liverpool to Halifax which was to see Private Kirby on board.

(Right above: *The image of Essequibo, seen here clad in war-time garb, is from a Google web-site. Built in 1914, she survived the conflict and afterwards served on commercial routes principally to and from South America*.)

Having sailed from Liverpool on March 22, the vessel arrived in Halifax on or just prior to the final day of that month and while his condition was reported as not to have changed during the voyage, he was apparently…*still coughing and vomiting*.

Private Kirby may now have enjoyed a short period of remission: It would appear that soon after his almost immediate admission into the *Lake Edward Sanatorium* in the province of Québec, a facility specializing in tubercular cases, he was deemed to have…*slightly improved*…and it was also reported that he was…*Feeling rather better – appetite is improving and temperature practically normal.*

Any improvement, alas, would prove to be illusory and on May 6 of 1917, Private Albert Kirby passed away in the same *Lake Edward Sanatorium*.

(continued)

The son of Richard Kirby, former fisherman deceased of tuberculosis on May 5, 1897 and of Martha Kirby, deceased on October 30, 1900, also of tuberculosis, of Kirby's Cove, Burin, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Jessie-May and to Eliizabeth-Gertrude*.

Gertrude, named by Albert Kirby as being his next-of-kin, is addressed in his early papers as Mrs. William McLaughlin of 73 ½ Windsor Street, Halifax, before on later documents being found as Mrs. Gertrude Vincent of 128, Cunard Street, in the same city. However, in neither case does she seem to figure in the 1921 Census.

Again, since Albert Kirby died in the Number 5 Military Distict (Québec), in the above-named sanatorium, it begs the question of how he came to be interred in Halifax. Perhaps his sister Gertrude was involved, but again, nothing a propos appears in his files.

Albert Kirby had enlisted in Lethbridge, Alberta, at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and three months: date of birth in Kirby's Cove, District of Burin, Newfoundland, November 10, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Private Albert Kirby was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).