



Sergeant James Joseph Maher (Number 178121) of the 87th Battalion (Canadian Grenadier Guards), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in the Canadian Cemetery No.2, Neuville-St-Vaast: Grave reference I.B.33.

(Right: The image of the Canadian Grenadier Guards cap badge is from the Regimental Rogue web-site.)

(continued)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of a pulp and repairman (this should surely read *pulp and paper-man*) James Joseph Maher appears to have left behind him no indication in his files of his movement from Argentina in the Dominion of Newfoundland to the paper-producing town of Iroquois Falls in the Canadian province of Ontario, his recorded place of residence at the time of enlistment.

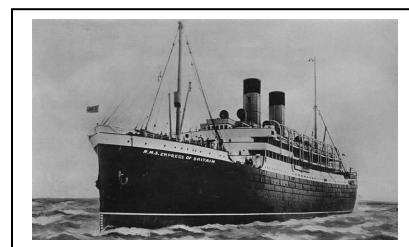
That enlistment, however, took place at a considerable distance from his given address, in the city of Montréal. James Joseph Maher presented himself there for medical examination on December 13 of 1915 and enlisted then attested on that same day. His first pay records also record that on this same day, the now-Private Maher was *taken on strength* by the 87th Overseas Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) – based in Montréal - of the Canadian Infantry. He was to remain in service with the 87th Battalion for his entire military career.

The *official* conclusion to the formalities of Private Maher's enlistment came ten days later, on December 23 when an officer - with an illegible name - acting on behalf of the Officer Commanding the 87th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Irving Putman Rexford, declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private Maher likely trained with his 87th Battalion at the newly-opened – in April of 1914 – Canadian Grenadier Guards Armoury on Esplanade Avenue, Montreal. The unit had been recruiting only since September of 1915 but was apparently prepared, both in numbers and the quality of its instruction, to be sent for *overseas service* in April of 1916.

However, it appears from his records that Private Maher spent a month of that interim period in hospital. Suffering from pneumonia, he is documented as having been a patient of St. John's Military Hospital from February 11 until March 10 of 1916. He also made five visits to a military dentist during late March and then April after his battle with pneumonia.

The 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) boarded ship in the harbour at Halifax on the 23rd day of April of the spring of 1916. It was the *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company* vessel *Empress of Britain* on which Private Maher's Battalion was to take passage to the United Kingdom in the company of the 72nd and 76th Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the Number 3 Party of the 224th Battalion and a re-enforcement draft of the 13th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.



(Right above: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

The *Empress* sailed on April 25 to dock ten days later in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. From there the unit was transported southwards by train to the Canadian military camp established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which place *Camp Bramshott* owed its name – in the county of Hampshire.



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

Before they left on *active service*, that is to say to a theatre of war, Canadian soldiers were encouraged to allocate a monthly sum from their pay to a recipient of their choice. It was often a parent and such was the case of Private Maher who allotted a monthly fifteen dollars, as of May 1, 1916, to his father, Alexander. He also penned a will some seven weeks later, on June 20 while still at the Canadian camp at Bramshott, in which he bequeathed his everything to his mother.

In the middle of August the 87th Battalion was ordered overseas. In fact, at the time, a great number of Canadian units were to cross the English Channel to France. The newly-organized Canadian 4th Division was leaving the United Kingdom on *active service*.

Private Maher's Battalion began the journey leaving *Camp Bramshott* on the morning of August 11, 1916. It embarked in the English south-coast port of Southampton onto His Majesty's Transport *Archangel* later that evening and documents confirm that it landed in the French port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine at a quarter past seven on the next morning, August 12. The Battalion then marched to a rest camp, remaining in the area of Le Havre for a further three days*.



**By this time a large Canadian Base Depot had been established at Rouelles in the vicinity of Le Havre and, until mid-spring of 1917, re-enforcements passed through there before being despatched to report to their new units 'in the field'. However, the 87th Battalion War Diary makes no mention of it, likely because the arriving units of the 4th Canadian Division were already organized autonomous forces.*

(Right above: *The photograph of HMT Archangel is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) was an element of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4th Canadian Division, the last such Canadian formation to be despatched to *active service* on the Western Front during the Great War*.

**There was also a Canadian 5th Division but, once having been formed, it remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of the Great War, there to act as a training formation and as a re-enforcement pool.*

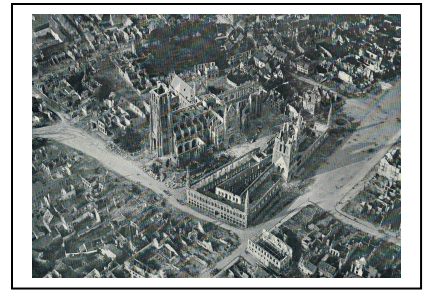


(Right: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

On August 15 Private Maher was on his way north, to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and then beyond, to serve for six weeks in a sector to the south-west of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).

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(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled *Ypres-la-Morte* (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from *Illustration*)



On October 3, 1916, having been withdrawn from Belgium only days before to undergo training in north-western France, the 87th Battalion was ordered by the British High Command to move south, to the area of *the Somme*, where the wretched British summer offensive had by now become a murderous campaign of the autumn as well.

Having travelled from the north at first by train and then on foot, the unit arrived in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert a week later, on October 10. There the Battalion then bivouacked at *Brickfields Camp*.



Meanwhile, by early September of 1916, when Canadian troops had first made their appearance in that particular theatre of the War, the *First Battle of the Somme* had already been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers working in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background* – from *Illustration*)

On the first day of *1st 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 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 Courcellette* – photograph from 2015)



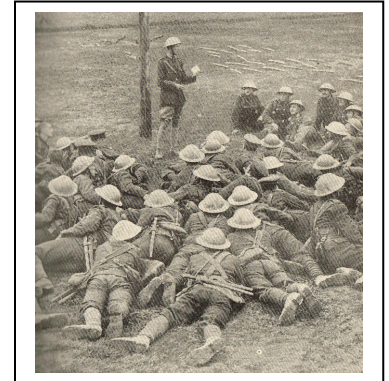
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray at the end of August and beginning of September to become 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. For the most part the offensive had not been a happy beginning to the campaign for the newly-arrived Canadian troops – nor a happy continuation for the British units which were still there.

One of the few successes of the day, however, had been Canadian: the capture of Courcelette by units of the 2nd Canadian Division.

All of this, of course, had already occurred some seven weeks before the arrival of the 87th Battalion on the scene.

(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*)



The 87th Battalion had been in the trenches since October 17, but it was not until six minutes past mid-day on October 21 that the unit put it an attack and captured the *Regina Trench* strong-point, an objective which had previously proved to be impregnable.

This success was unfortunately to be short-lived and *Regina Trench* was subsequently ceded to the Germans following a counter-attack.

The Battalion then retired but remained in the area of the village of Pozières until October 30 when it moved into billets, further to the rear, in the town of Albert itself.

In November the unit moved back into the area of *Regina Trench* on two further occasions: the first passed with little incident; however, during the second tour, the Battalion was to be part of a further attack, this on November 18. *Regina Trench* having by then been definitively captured, the objective on *this* date had been to occupy a number of adjacent German positions.

The operation had been only partially successful and the unit incurred a total of another two-hundred thirty-two *killed, wounded and missing in action.*

By this time Private Maher had received a first promotion: on November 13 he had been appointed by his Commanding Officer to the rank of lance corporal.

(Right above and right: *Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial may be seen in both images. – colour photograph from 2016*)



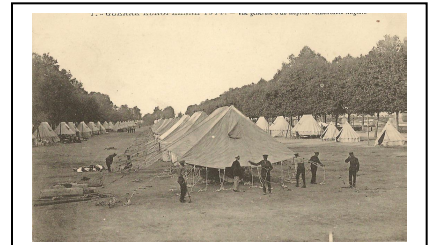
(Right: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the ground surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

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Relieved on the day following this last attack, November 19, it was only three days later, on November 22, that the 87th Battalion began to march away from *the Somme*. By December 4 the unit had marched in a semi-circular itinerary – to the westward and then to the northward – to arrive at Fréwillers, a community some twenty-five kilometres to the north-west of the city of Arras.

However, during that first day of the his Battalion's retirement from *First Somme*, on the way from huts on the Bapaume Road to its billets in Bouzincourt, Lance Corporal Maher was to be wounded by enemy shell-fire. Having incurred injuries from flying shrapnel to the face and to a buttock, he was at first evacuated to the 3rd Australian Casualty Clearing Station at Gézaincourt.

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



From Gézaincourt, Lance Corporal Maher was forwarded on the morrow to the 26th General Hospital in the area of the coastal town of Étaples for further treatment. He was to remain there for the next eighteen days, until December 11, when he was released to the 6th Convalescent Depot, also at Étaples. Two days later again, he was ordered further up the coast to Boulogne, there to serve at Base Details until December 22 when he was despatched back to his unit.



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

Lance Corporal Maher is documented as having re-joined the 87th Battalion on December 24, Christmas Eve, on a day when the unit had been relieved in the front area and had retired to the vicinity of Camblain L'Abbé where it was to spend Christmas Day and the two days following.

From the time of its arrival in early December at Fréwillers from *the Somme*, until the last week in March of the following year, 1917, Lance Corporal Maher's unit – as with most other Canadian units – had been posted in the sectors of the line between Béthune in the north and Arras in the south. There, during that winter of 1916-1917, they had settled into the daily routines and rigours 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: 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 winter of 1916-1917 had been one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.



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

Casualties were to be few during this entire period and, as ever, it was the enemy artillery to which those that occurred were mainly due – some two-thirds of all *Great War* casualties were the result of shell-fire. It was to be sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, dental work which were to keep the medical facilities busy during the winter of 1916-1917.

On March 26 the 87th Battalion was relieved from its then-current tour in the front-line positions and withdrawn to a *rest area* at Chateau de la Haie. From the next day until April 2 the unit underwent extensive training for the upcoming British offensive, so whether there was much *rest* to be enjoyed is speculative – but then, no-one had been shot at.

On April 1, Lance Corporal Maher was to be promoted on a second occasion, directly to the rank of sergeant. Curiously, since the time of his first promotion in November of the preceding year, he appears to have consistently been paid ten cents per day more than the normal five cents allotted to the rank of lance corporal. While this appears on his pay records, no explanation seems to accompany it.

On April 3, the 87th Battalion moved to the front area.

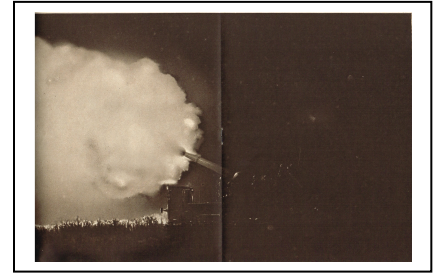
On April 4, 5 and 6 the unit supplied working-parties and dug trenches.

On April 7, the final elements of the Battalion moved forward to the front area.

By ten o'clock on the evening of April 8, the 87th Battalion reported itself to be in its battle positions.

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As those days passed, the artillery barrage grew progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion described it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn threw retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy.



(Right: A heavy *British artillery piece** continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from *Illustration*)

**It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – also participated.*

Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

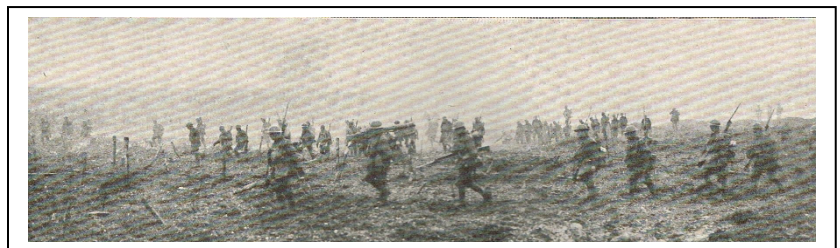


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial* which, since 1936, has stood on *Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3^d 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*)



Excerpt from the 87th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917: *Easter Monday, zero hour 5.30 A.M. The Battalion, 520 strong all ranks, went “over the top” supported by a strong artillery barrage.*

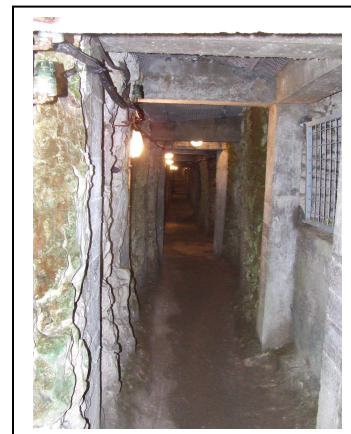
Excerpts from 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for April 9, 1917:

12.25 p.m. - 87th Battalion report that a party of 75th Battalion who were out in front of BASSO (Trench) were counter attacked by the enemy, and believe that some of our men were taken prisoners.

12.55 p.m. – The 87th Battalion advise that they are sending out a Lewis Gun Officer, with 4 guns, and 20 men to clean up the situation around the Old German Front Line & proceed on to BASSO after this is accomplished.

2.00 p.m. – O.C., 87th Battalion reports one Machine Gun of the 11th Machine Gun Coy. operating sixty yards left of crater where LIEUT. Hannaford and his party are established.

(Right: Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later on: They were hewn out of the limestone to ensure secrecy and also, at the same time, the security of the attacking troops – photograph from 2008(?))



(Right below: German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration)

The assault by the 87th Battalion had enjoyed only mixed results at first, even some of the successful attackers having been forced to retire because their flanks had become vulnerably exposed. Eventually, however, the advance was able to continue, one of the last attacks going in at a quarter to seven in the evening to clear two more trenches of the enemy.



The eldest son of Alexander Maher, fisherman, and of Mary Ellen Maher (née Kane) he was also brother to Richard, to Michael, to John, to Alexander and to Mary. Sergeant Maher was reported as having been...*killed in action during the attack at Vimy Ridge...on April 9, 1917.*

James Joseph Maher had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty years: date of birth at Little Placentia, Salmonier, Newfoundland, November 19, 1895.

Sergeant James Joseph Maher was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 25, 2023.

