



Private Leander Mills (Number 55479) of the 19th Battalion (Central Ontario), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Courcellette British Cemetery: Grave reference X.E.18.

(Right: *The image of the cap-badge of the 19th Battalion (Central Ontario) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded on his attestation papers as that of a decorator, on the passenger list of the SS *Lintrose* which sailed from Port aux Basques, Dominion of Newfoundland, to the port of North Sydney, Cape Breton, on July 17, 1913, Leander Isidore Mills also declares himself as a *paperhanger* on his way to Toronto.

Having been in that city for some fifteen months, during which time war had been declared, Leander Mills is documented as having enlisted on October 28 and taken on strength by the 48th Highlanders of Toronto. This formation, being a Canadian Militia unit, was forbidden by law to operate outside the borders of the country, thus its function at this time was to enlist recruits and to hold them until such time as they could be transferred to one of the newly-forming overseas battalions.

Such appears to have been the case with Private Mills. Only ten days following his enlistment, on November 7, the 19th Battalion (*Central Ontario*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was formed in Toronto and was to concentrate at *Exhibition Park*. As his early pay records show him as being remunerated for his services by the 19th Battalion on that same November 7, this is more than likely the date on which he was *struck off strength* by the Highlanders, to be *taken on strength* by the 19th Battalion.

It was to be a further four days before the formalities were dealt with: on November 11 he presented himself for medical examination – to be pronounced as *...fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force* – before undergoing attestation. The proceedings were brought to a conclusion later that day when the officer commanding the 19th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel John I. McLaren, 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.*

In the meantime, Private Mills' new unit had been quartered in buildings on the *Exhibition Park* site itself where training was also now becoming a part of the daily routine and equipment was beginning to arrive for the novice soldiers. And thus it remained until six-thirty in the evening of May 12 of the following spring.

At that time on that date, the one-thousand six-hundred seven officers and *other ranks* of the 19th Battalion boarded two trains for the almost twelve-hour journey to Montreal where the unit was to take ship. Immediately upon arrival early on the morning of Thursday, May 13, it boarded His Majesty's Transport *Scandinavian*, a requisitioned vessel of the *Allan Line*. Private Mills and his battalion were not to travel alone to the United Kingdom: also taking passage for the Atlantic crossing was the 2nd Divisional Reserve Park.



(Right above: *The image of the SS Scandinavian is from the bing.com/images web-site.*)

Having sailed later that same day, it was nine days later, on May 22, that *Scandinavian* put into the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport, and a further twenty-four hours before the Battalion disembarked *...when it was taken ashore in Ferry Boats, and entrained for WESTENHANGAR Station, Kent (Battalion War Diary)...* its destination being reached at 8.30 p.m.

The Battalion thereupon detrained and subsequently marched to the camp of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, to which it was now attached, at WEST SANDLING, about two miles distant.

West Sandling was a subsidiary camp of the then-being-established Canadian military complex of Shorncliffe. The ensemble was on the Dover Straits in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone through which many of the Canadian units were from now-on to pass on their way to the Continent. At the time of Private Mills' arrival there, the units of the newly-formed Canadian 2nd Division were amassing there for final training and for despatch, during the month of September, to France and thence to Belgium.



(Right above: *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)*

It was thus, as a unit of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 2nd Division that the 19th Battalion (*Central Ontario*) was to depart from Shorncliffe in mid-September. According to his own personal papers, Private Mills was in fact one of the advance party to pass through the south-coast port of Southampton on September 12, to disembark at Le Havre, the French industrial city on the estuary of the River Seine, on the following day.



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

Three days later, on November 15, a train carrying Private Mills and his advance party from Le Havre drew into the station at Pont du Briques, there to be joined by the main body of the 19th Battalion. On the evening of the day prior, this formation had marched from West Sandling Camp to the docks at Folkestone, had boarded a cross-Channel ferry – one of many requisitioned for the War – to arrive in the French port of Boulogne at a quarter to three in the morning of the next day and from there march to nearby Ostrohove Camp.



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

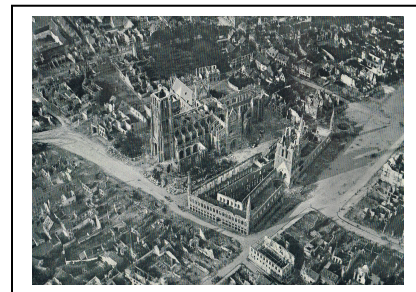
(Right: *The French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)*



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Only hours later, at noon, the Battalion had then marched to Pont du Briques to be re-united with the advance party. The entire Battalion then proceeded to St-Omer by train before continuing on foot to Arques, to Eblinghem and finally to its bivouacs in the vicinity of Wallon Cappel. They were reached by midnight.

Private Mills' unit was now to march during the course of the next five days into the Kingdom of Belgium and to where the Canadian 2nd Division was to take over from the British a sector which lay to the south of the battered city of Ypres, about half-way between it and the Franco-Belgian frontier, in the area of Dranoutre and Kemmel. It was to remain in this area for the next eleven months, for the most part enduring the rigours, routines – and perils – of life in the trenches*.



(Right above: 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*)

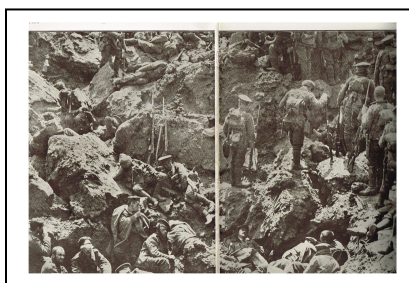
**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then 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 – from *Illustration*)



It was some seven months later on, in early April of 1916 that the 2nd Canadian Division underwent its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation. It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27th day of March, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then followed up with an infantry attack. The role of the newly-arrived Canadian formation was to later pursue the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.



However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the often putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and then a resolute German defence, greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4.

Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

(Preceding page: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

It appears that it was not to be until April 6 that the 19th Battalion was ordered to a ...*state of readiness...* and ordered to relieve a battalion of the 6th Brigade in the area of Voormezele, there to remain. Early the following morning it was ordered to a rest camp before only hours later being ...*warned that services probably required tonight for a bombing attack.* Just after seven o'clock that evening the ...*19th Battalion instructed to clear up front line from 24 (a trench) to Canal* (Both excerpts from 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary). This was accomplished later on that evening.

On April 8 the 19th Battalion ...*was in the trenches Numbers 18 to 20, 18th, 19th and 21st Battalions attack Craters No. 2 and No. 3.* That evening the 19th relieved the 31st Battalion.

Still in the trenches on April 12, Private Mills' Battalion was relieved on that day to withdraw into Divisional Reserve where it remained until April 22. Both the 19th Battalion's participation at St-Éloi and the number of ensuing casualties appear to have been minimal.

The next major altercation in which Private Mills and his unit were to be involved came about in early June in the south-east sector of the *Ypres Salient* where the newly-formed Canadian 3rd Division* were by that time holding the line.

**The 3rd Division officially came into being on the Continent at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of the New Year, 1916. At first incorporated into the area where the Canadian 1st Division was serving, in March and April it moved into the Ypres Salient – as did the 1st Division just afterwards.*

Six weeks after the confrontation at St-Éloi, on June 2, the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian control. This area was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Railway Dugouts*, *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*.



(Right above: *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.

In the meanwhile, Private Mills' 19th Battalion was still in the rear area of Reninghelst, serving in *Divisional Reserve*.

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There the unit was to then be *'standing to'*, in the same place, for the following two days, thus to take no part in the counter-strike of the day following the German attack, June 3, an operation which was to prove to be a costly disaster for the Canadians.

It was not until June 4 that the Battalion was ordered forward, to the area of Dickebusch and to the nearby so-named *Railway Dugouts*.

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



From that date of June 4 until June 11 the Battalion War Diarist merely reports the unit as being *...In trenches...* until June 11 when it withdrew into support. No mention is made of either any infantry action by the unit nor of any casualties incurred due enemy action. On the eve and the day of what proved to be the final attack by the Canadians, June 12 and 13, and on the next when the German artillery was reported elsewhere as having been particularly heavy – and up until June 17 by which time things were becoming quieter, the daily entry reads simply as *...In support as above.*



(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*)



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

The result of the confrontation was to be stalemate: by the end of the confrontation, apart from a small German gain in the vicinity of *Hooze*, both sides were back much where they had been eleven days previously - and the cemeteries were that much fuller.



(Right: *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*)

Thus the Canadian troops returned to the everyday routines of trench warfare for some two months after which time the unit – as was to be the case of most of the other Canadian Battalions – was once more to be withdrawn, on this occasion for training in *'open warfare'*. After the interim of July and August, the Canadians were to be ordered south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

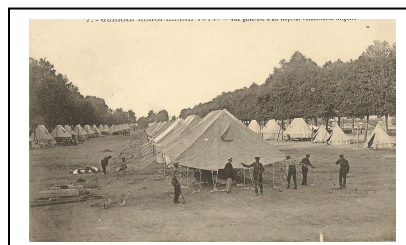
However, in the mean-time, the 19th Battalion War Diary entry for July 26, 1916, reads innocuously as follows: *In the trenches.*

Although the War Diarist thus makes no mention of it, his own papers show Private Mills to have been wounded on this date whereupon he was evacuated to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance at Reninghelst. Soon afterwards on the same day he was forwarded to the 10th Casualty Clearing Station at the Rémy Siding, Poperinghe. He was suffering from shell-shock, from a bayonet wound to the foot and from contusions to the face.

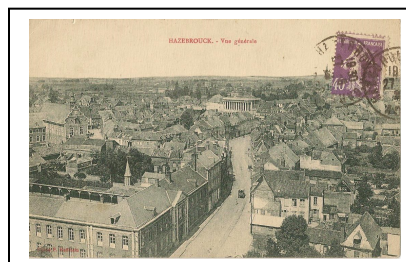


(Right above: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

(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*)



Apparently Private Mills' day was not yet over: from the 10th CCS he was now to be transported by the Number 18 Ambulance Train to the 50th Casualty Clearing Station in the area of the northern French town of Hazebrouck for further treatment. There he is documented as remaining until August 5 on which date he was discharged to return *to duty* which he did on the following day during a period when his unit was withdrawn to the rear area at Reninghelst.



(Right above: *The northern French town of Hazebrouck, likely at a period between the wars – from a vintage post-card*)

On August 8, three days after Private Mills' return *to duty*, the 19th Battalion returned to the forward area in close proximity to Vierstraat Village. There the unit was to remain for a week; in doing so it was not in situ to see His Majesty King George V as he passed through the Corps area on the morning of August 15.

That morning of August 15 was, however, to be Private Mills' Battalion's final moment of service in the trenches in Flanders until some fourteen months later, in the autumn of 1917. It withdrew once more to Reninghelst that afternoon, to remain there until August 23.

On that day ...*the 2nd Canadian Division was withdrawn from the line, and ordered to proceed to the Second Army Training Area near ST OMER.*

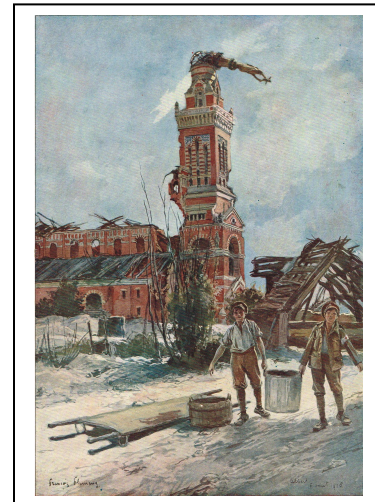
It was on September 4 that the 19th Battalion left its billets in the village of Nordausques and the nearby training area whereupon it marched to the railway station at Audruicq and entrained for the eleven-hour journey southwards to the area of *the Somme.*

Meanwhile, in the ten days prior to their departure, Private Mills and his comrades-in-arms had had a busy time: route marches; communication drill; musketry; bombing; lectures; section and platoon drill; machine-gun classes; stretcher-bearer classes; clothing and equipment inspections; even training in co-operation with aircraft.

By 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 had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of just four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

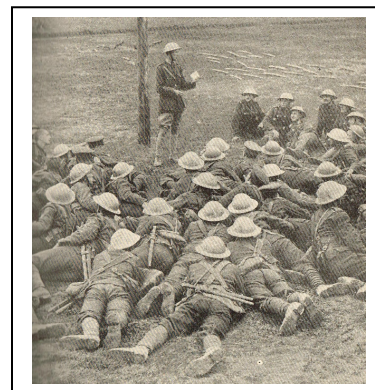
On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.

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



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 had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first 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, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



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



The 19th Battalion left the train which had brought them to *the Somme* at three-thirty in the morning of September 5. After a further three hours on foot, the unit took up billets in the village of Agenville.

A further four days of marching was in store for the Battalion as it passed through – on occasion halting for a meal, a rest or to spend the night in the vicinity of – the communities of Bonneville, Teutencourt, Vadencourt. On the last day, September 9, it reported to the large *Brickfields Camp*, adjacent to the provincial town of Albert, where it bivouacked.

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On the following day again, the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade – of which the 19th Battalion was a unit – was ordered into the line to relieve the 1st Infantry Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division. Each man carried with him apart from his personal equipment ...2 MILLS bombs, 2 sandbags, and two extra bandoliers of ammunition. 4 LEWIS guns* with 3,000 rounds SAA (small-arms ammunition) were taken into each sub-sector, 4 Colt and 1 Vickers machine gun at Battalion H.Q.

**A light machine-gun requiring a crew of two*

The following days were spent in preparing for the offensive planned for September 15 and, as reported in the Battalion War Diary, driving back small parties of German infantry intent on entering the Canadian positions.

The preparations for the most part comprised digging saps – approach trenches to the German positions – work that reportedly went on day and night all during this period. The enemy artillery also went on all day and night: on September 12 it was heavy enough to result in forty-three *killed and wounded* in the 19th Battalion positions – on the next day the toll was thirty-four all told – on September 14 it was eighty-eight.

(Excerpt from the 19th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916) *In conjunction with our Fourth and the French Armies, the Canadian Corps attacked the German position. The 4th Canadian Infantry Bde. took part in the attack in conjunction with the 6th Canadian Infantry Bde. on our left, and the 15th Division (British) on our right.*



(Right: *The village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the 1st Battle of the Somme – photograph from 12017*)

(Extract from the 4th Canadian Brigade Operational Order Number 70)

The 4th Canadian Infantry Bde will capture, consolidate, and hold a portion of the main objective...including Strong Point at SUGAR FACTORY...

The 19th Battalion was to act in support, that is to say, as a sort of immediate reserve.

The attack of September 15 on Courcellette by the Canadian 2nd Division was one of the few successes in an otherwise less-than-conspicuous day for the Allied forces. At six minutes to eight in the morning, little more than ninety minutes after the first assault, the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade was reporting that it had taken its final objective, the sugar factory; at eight o'clock the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion was carrying out its instructions and in the process of consolidating the gains made.



More ominously, perhaps, was the report of a quarter to four in the afternoon that the ... 19th (Battalion) *report their left is being heavily shelled and have had to vacate some trenches, they are badly in need of parties to carry out wounded.*

(Previous page: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)

Seven hours later again, the 19th Battalion had been ordered to withdraw.

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



Casualty report: *Killed in Action – Whilst in a captured trench at Courcelette, he was hit and instantly killed by shrapnel from an enemy shell.*

The son of Elija Mills, carpenter – to whom he had allotted, as of June 1, 1915, a monthly eighteen dollars from his pay, and of Elizabeth Mills (née Green) of Burlington (formerly *North West Arm*), Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Abram, William-Lloyd, Dora-Lilly, to Gertrude and to Walter.

Private Mills was reported as having been *killed in action* on September 15, 1916, in fighting in the vicinity of the village of Courcelette.

Leander Isidore Mills had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-five years and three months: date of birth at North West Arm (today *Burlington*), Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland, August 2, 1889 (attestation papers) – also August 13, 1889, according to a copy of Methodist Parish Records.

Private Leander Isidore Mills 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 26, 2023.

