



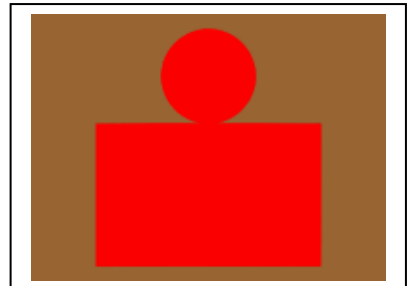
Private James Edward O'Connor*, Number 1018582, of the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Sancourt British Cemetery: Grave reference I.A.40..

**While the CWGC – and therefore his gravestone – record F.E. as his initials, his Attestation Paper, his signature, and the 1916 Saskatchewan Census (see below) cite James Edward.*

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry**) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

**Despite this designation, the unit was authorized in 1914 as a Canadian Infantry battalion.*

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a farmer, James Edward O'Connor appears to have left behind him little trace of his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The only information provided seems to be that from the 1916 Census for the three Prairie Provinces which documents him as being a farm-worker labouring for Walter White and his family – wife and three children - in the area of Kindersley.

He and Walter apparently were not only employee and employer, but they were also close enough for James Edward to name Walter as his next-of-kin and to later bequeath him his all in a will signed on April 3, 1917.

In that 1916 Census the occupations of James Edward O'Connor are cited as those of both farm-worker and soldier, perhaps hardly surprisingly since 1916 was the year in which he enlisted. It was on June 20 that he presented himself in the community of Rosetown to sign on, and also for a medical examination, a procedure which pronounced him as... *fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.*

He thereupon attested.

It was then the Commanding Officer of the 232nd Battalion (*Saskatchewan*), Lieutenant Colonel Reginald Peter Laurie, who was to bring the formalities of enlistment to a conclusion when he 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 O'Connor was then *taken on strength* by Lieutenant Colonel Laurie's 232nd Battalion.

Private O'Connor's new unit was based in the – designated as such since just 1913 - city of North Battleford where there was an armoury for the personnel to train. Whether he was posted there immediately or whether he was to return to Walter White's farm for the remainder of the agricultural season is not recorded; however there was now to be a waiting-period of some ten-eleven months before the 232nd Battalion was eventually called to *overseas service.*

After a lengthy journey by train across almost half the continent, on May 27 of the following year, 1917, the second part* of Private O'Connor's Battalion – three officers and one-hundred sixty-four *other ranks* - embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. The next few days before sailing would be busy as a goodly number of military units was to board the vessel, one of the largest ships afloat at the time.



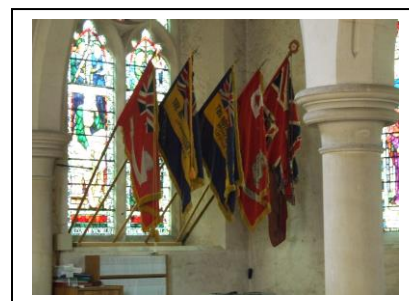
**The main force had left Halifax on April 18, 1917, on board the Northland.*

(Right above: *Sister-ship to Britannic – that vessel to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean a month later, in November of 1916 – and also to the ill-fated Titanic, HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor in the company of HM Hospital Ship Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay, Island of Lemnos, in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London)*

Many of the Canadian Infantry Battalions now to march up *Olympic's* gangways were under-strength; in fact they were the last of the Overseas Battalions that Canada had authorized at the outbreak of the *Great War* in the summer of 1914. From now on a different system was to be put in place for organizing future volunteers and conscripts to serve on the battlefields of Europe.

Thus, apart from Private O'Connor's 2nd contingent of the 232nd Battalion, other military personnel taking passage to the United Kingdom on the vessel were from the 122nd, 191st, 207th, 217th, 230th, 243rd, 246th, 252nd, 254th, and 255th Battalions of Canadian Infantry.

Olympic sailed from Halifax on June 2 and after an uneventful crossing docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool a week later, on June 9. From dockside Private O'Connor and his unit were transported south by train to the large Canadian military complex established by then in the southern county of Hampshire, in close proximity to the two villages of Liphook and Bramshott, the latter having lent its name to *Camp Bramshott*.



(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)

A day later, this second contingent, Private O'Connor's, was now absorbed into the 15th Canadian (*Reserve*) Battalion (*Saskatchewan*). The main unit of the 232nd Battalion had already suffered this fate six weeks prior upon its arrival at *Bramshott* from Canada*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched for overseas service more than two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions 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 they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been specifically designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

There was now to be yet a further lengthy period for him to wait before Private O'Connor's services were required on the Continent. On November 24 of 1917 he was *struck off strength* by the 15th (*Reserve*) Battalion and transferred – on paper – to the 5th (*Western Cavalry*) Battalion already serving on the *Western Front* and on that night – November 24-25 – he took ship, likely via the English south-coast of Southampton and the French industrial port-city of Le Havre – across the English Channel to *active service* in France.



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

On that second date, November 25, Private O'Connor reported to the 1st Canadian Base Depot, by that time established in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étaples. He was one of the total of one-hundred nineteen re-enforcements to arrive there from England that day.

On November 30, three-hundred eighty-four *other ranks* – Private O'Connor among that number - were despatched from the Base Depot to the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, newly quartered in the area of Calonne-Ricouart at eighty kilometres distant and almost directly to the east from Étaples. They arrived at the Camp later on that same day.

It was only days later again that Private O'Connor was ordered to join his new unit, the 5th Battalion, in the field. The date of his departure from the Reinforcement Camp appears not to be recorded but his personal documents cite December 3 as the date on which he *arrived*, one of a detachment of one-hundred forty-two other ranks to do so on that day.

Three days before, on the day on which Private O'Connor had made his way to the Reinforcement Camp, the 5th Battalion had been ordered withdrawn from trenches in the *Liévin Sector* and had retired by light railway into Brigade Reserve at the encampment of *Souchez Huts* – which is where Private O'Connor reported *to duty* on that December 3, 1917.



(Right above: *A light-railway line under construction in a Canadian sector: By the end of the conflict the Canadians were to have constructed thousands of kilometres of railway lines in the area behind the front and leading up to it. – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

Private O'Connor's new unit, the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*), was an element of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade which was itself a component of the Canadian Division (later to be designated as the 1st Canadian Division). The 5th Battalion had crossed the Atlantic in the convoy which had left the Gaspé in early October carrying the Canadian Division for service in the United Kingdom after which it had then crossed the Channel to France in mid-February of 1915.

The first two months on the Continent were to be served by the Canadian Division in the *Fleurbaix Sector* of northern France, a relatively quiet posting where the newcomers had learned the practical side of their trade. Then, in mid-April, the Division had been ordered north into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, into the *Ypres Salient*, a lethal place at the best of times, where it had still been in the process of relieving French troops when the Germans had launched an offensive.



(Right: *Troops being transported to the front-line positions in busses: The majority, however, would make the transfer on foot. - from Illustration*)

Towards the end of April and into the month of May of 1915 was to be fought the *Second Battle of Ypres*, the struggle for the city of that name which had begun at five o'clock in the evening of the twenty-second day of that month with the coming of a yellow-green cloud of chlorine gas, its first recorded use in war-time. There the name *Gravenstafel* had become one of the 5th Battalion's first battle honours.

(Right: *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. It was in this area that the Canadian Division withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – to the north-east of Ypres (today Ieper) during the latter days of April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *An artist's impression of Ypres in the summer of 1915. By the end of the war there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

By the evening of April 28, a day which the 5th Battalion had spent in hastily-dug positions in a field, it had incurred a casualty list of seventeen *killed in action*, and two-hundred twenty-five *wounded or missing in action*. It was likely of little consolation to learn that its losses had been light when compared to several other Canadian units.



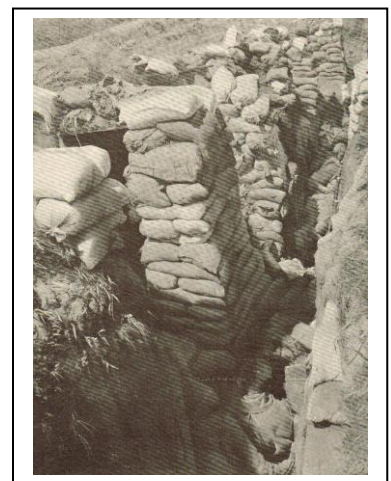
On the following day the Battalion had then retired to the west bank of the *Yser Canal* which runs through Ypres before turning northwards, there to be posted until May 4. On the two subsequent days the unit then had moved to the northern French community of Outersteene, there to rest, to re-organize and to re-enforce. All too soon, only days hence in mid-May, it was to be fighting once more.



(Right above: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after elements of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn to its western bank from Vlamertinghe – west is to the left – photograph from 2014*)

The 5th Battalion's next confrontation was to be in the vicinity of the French communities of Festubert and Givenchy. On this occasion it had been the British – and thus the attached Empire (*Commonwealth*) forces – who were to do the attacking. For a gain of some three kilometres, a further two-thousand casualties had been accumulated by the Canadian Division*.

(Right: *The Labyrinth – French-held trenches just south of the area of Festubert in the summer of 1915, and after an attack, as witnessed by the dead in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)



****The Indian Meerut Division also incurred some two-thousand casualties at this time and the British many more. The French, whose offensive further to the south had been supported by the British-inspired attacks at Festubert and Givenchy, were to count over one-hundred thousand killed, wounded and missing.***

As of mid-July there had followed some nine months to be spent by the 1st Canadian Division – and thus the 5th Battalion - in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just on the Belgian side of the frontier with France. During that time the 2nd Canadian Division – in mid-September of that year – and then the 3rd Canadian Division – as of New-Year's Day of 1916 – had joined the 1st Canadian Division in the field.

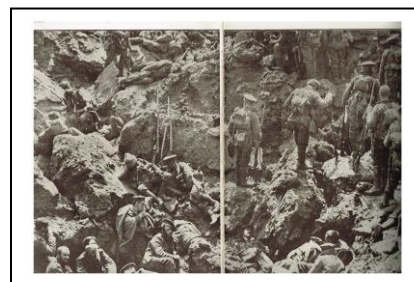


(Right above: Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014)

After having spent a quiet autumn and winter in the southern sectors of Belgium – the winters of the *Great War* on the *Western Front* were *all* to be relatively quiet – the 2nd Division was the first Canadian force to undertake an offensive operation in the spring of 1916, this venture to be in tandem with British units.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it had been here that the British had excavated a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they were then to 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. The Canadians had thereupon enjoyed no more success than had the British, and by the seventeenth day of the month, when the battle had been called off, both sides were to be back where they had been 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 – from Illustration)

Meanwhile, during the months of March and April, the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions had been ordered from the *Ploegsteert Sector*, now to take up positions in the *Ypres Salient*. The 3rd Canadian Division had been the first to do so, moving by a semi-circular itinerary to a sector to the south-east of the battered city. In early April the 1st Canadian Division had followed suit, moving into a southern sector of the *Salient* to the immediate right of the 3rd Canadian Division and to the immediate left of the 2nd Canadian Division.

Thus the Canadian Corps was now to be fighting on a united front.

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The fight for *Mount Sorrel* in June of 1916 had been the next major confrontation between the Canadians and the German Army. The Canadian High Command at the time had been considering a limited offensive of their own when the enemy had attacked the sector of the *Ypres Salient* which was at the time the responsibility of the 3rd Canadian Division.

But the situation had deteriorated so rapidly and to such a degree – the line had been ruptured and a German breakthrough had been feared - that units from the adjacent 1st Canadian Division – and even from the 2nd Canadian Division serving farther afield – had been given notice to prepare to assist in stabilizing the situation.

After eleven days of sometimes horrific fighting, the opposing forces had ended back much where they had started. Little had changed, except that the cemeteries on both sides were by then that much fuller.

During this period the 5th Battalion had spent the first days not only standing-by but also absorbing a great deal of attention offered by the opposing artillery. By the time that the unit had retired to ‘D’ Camp in the rear area, it had incurred – from June 1 until June 6 inclusive – totals of sixty-one *killed in action* and one-hundred eighty-five *wounded in action*.



(Right above: *Vestiges of Canadian trenches of 1915-1916 – some admittedly restored – at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

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

The Battalion then was apparently to remain in the rear area until the evening of June 13 by which time other troops of the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions had attacked and re-captured much of the ground lost in the opening days of the affair. As other units were being relieved, the 5th Battalion had moved up into support positions in the areas of *Railway Dugouts* and of *Hill 60*.

Two days afterwards, while most of the unit had by then been withdrawn to *Camp ‘F’* in the area of *Poperinghe*, certain personnel seconded for task were still bringing out the wounded of June 13.



(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past are to be found 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. Apparently the hill was much higher until the first week in June of 1917 when a the detonation of a British mine removed much of the summit on the opening day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge. – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)

It was not until July 1 – Dominion Day – that the 5th Battalion had found itself back in the forward trenches and, in fact, once more in the area of *Hill 60*. On this occasion there was to be no ongoing infantry activity apart from the eternal patrolling – by both sides – and the usually short-lived engagement when the two parties had met; the few casualties incurred each day had been mostly due to the enemy’s artillery. Thus the unit was to return to the daily routines, rigours and perils of life in the trenches of the Great War*.

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



The unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.

Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)*

**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.*

The 5th Battalion had then been withdrawn on August 13 – as had the entire 1st Canadian Division at that same time - and had been moved into the 2nd Army Training Area in north-west France. The 1st Division would be followed in their turn by units of the other Canadian Divisions – by August of 1916 the 4th Canadian Division was arriving on the Continent – whose postings in Belgium were to be taken over by troops, mostly from the British Isles*, who were being withdrawn from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

**But including the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment.*

The 5th Battalion had begun its training as of August 15 before then being transported by train from Arques to Candas in the rear area of *the Somme* on August 28. It had then marched for the next five days towards the sound of the guns, to end at the military camp of Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the town of Albert – and within artillery range of the longer-ranged German guns.



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

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

(Right: Canadian soldiers working, carrying water in the centre of Albert, the town's already-damaged basilica in the background – from *Illustration*)

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 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 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

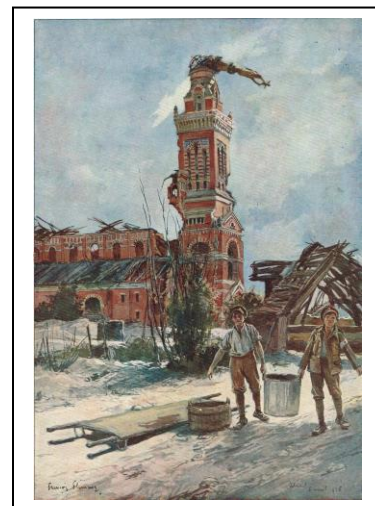
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray at the end of August to become part of a third general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

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

But whereas most of the now - and soon-to-be - arriving Canadian units – the 2nd Division was hard on the heels of the 1st Division - were to fight their first major engagement of *the Somme* during that British-led offensive of September 15-17, the 5th Battalion was to wait until September 26 and 27 before *going over the top*.

****1st Canadian Division troops had been involved as early as the final days of August.***

Up until that time, even though it had moved up to the forward area and into the front lines during the intervening period, its losses, by comparison with other battalions, had been light: fifteen *killed in action* and ninety *wounded*. In addition to that it was to be sent on a route march from September 13 to 16 inclusive before having been at first billeted at the *Brickfields Camp* and then in Albert for a total of eight days.



(Preceding page: Canadian wounded being bandaged on the field before being evacuated to the rear after the fighting at Courcelette – from *Le Miroir*)

All of that was to change during two days in late September. On the twenty-fourth day of the month the Battalion had moved forward into positions by then known as the *Chalk Pits*. On the evening of the morrow the unit had moved forward again, now to front-line positions where it had then relieved the 7th Canadian Infantry Battalion: *We have received orders to attack at an hour to be named, on the 26/19/16. Everyone is keyed up, for it is what many have put in 18 months waiting for.* (Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 25, 1916)

(Excerpts from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 26 of 1916) *...there was very little Artillery fire until about 11.30 a.m. when quite a lot of heavy stuff was fired into REGINA TRENCH*. The men had taken up their positions during the night in the kick-off trenches and numerous shell holes...and sharp at 12.35 p.m. the Artillery opened up an intense barrage...and the attacking force...advanced close behind it. The first Objective...ZOLLERN TRENCH...was reached, taken, cleared and consolidated with very little trouble...*

By the time the First wave had reached the first Objective they had been thinned down considerably, but by the time the third wave...reached the trench, the first and second waves had united and went forward as one to the second Objective...the HESSIAN TRENCH. As the barrage was moving forward very slowly the men would advance a short distance and then lie down and wait till it again lifted.

The casualties between the first and second Objectives were very heavy and the number of men who reached HESSIAN TRENCH were few indeed but by 2. p.m. we had occupied and were consolidating this trench.*

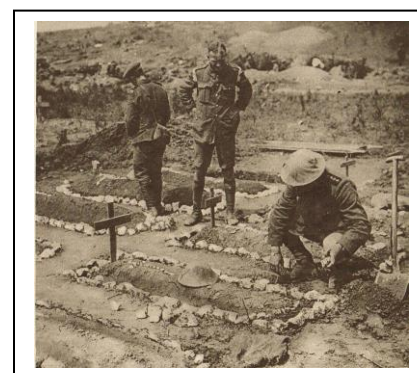
**It was later to be lost to a German counter-attack.*



(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*)

The toll had amounted to fifty-six *killed*, three-hundred three *wounded* and one-hundred twenty-two *missing in action*. Some of these latter had lost their way on the battlefield and would later return; others would report to duty after treatment in a medical facility; but some would never be found, after some six months to be officially...*presumed dead*.

**Regina Trench was to prove to be a hard nut to crack. Attacked with varying success on several occasions, it was not to be until the night of November 10-11 that it was finally taken by Canadian forces.*



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

The 5th Battalion had not played any further such role at *the Somme* although it was to remain in service there, again at times in the front line, for another three weeks.

On October 17, even as new units of the 4th Canadian Division had been arriving at the front, the 5th Battalion had been beginning to retire from the area. It had at first marched in a westerly direction, then had turned northwards so as to pass behind, in semi-circular fashion around to the west of, the shattered city of Arras and beyond.



(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras which had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)

On October 23, only six days after having marched out of Albert, the Battalion had arrived at its destination, Bajus, a commune some thirty kilometres to the north-west of the previously-cited Arras. The unit was now in an area whose sectors were to subsequently become more and more the responsibility of the Canadian Corps for much of the remainder of the *Great War*, a region which extended from the town of Béthune in the north down almost as far as Arras in the south.



(Right above: *A detachment of Canadian troops going up to the forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – 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 undertaken by both sides. From early on in the conflict, this latter activity had been encouraged by the British High Command which had continued to consider 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 apparently loathed these operations.

The casualty numbers diminished during this time and a glance at the War Diaries of some of the different Canadian Medical units shows that they were kept more busy by the numbers of sick and, perhaps a bit surprisingly, particularly by the thousands of dental problems which they were expected to treat, than they were by those *wounded in action*.

For the first twenty-four days of the month of January the 5th Battalion had been stationed behind the lines in camps at Houdain and Bully-Grenay. There its personnel were to indulge in such things as lectures, classes, training and inspections; there had also been instruction in bombing, wiring and the use of machine-guns; moreover, during that period everyone was treated to a bath.

Towards the end of the month there had been time spent in the trenches, a six-day tour. But it had been very quiet, the rare war-like activities to be reported had been enemy artillery-fire, and the Canadian response with rifle-grenades. The casualty count for the entire tour reflects the relative calm: *four wounded*.

All of February and the first nine days of the month of March had likewise been spent in the same forward areas; the number of casualties were to be similarly low; four *killed* and fifteen *wounded*, many of the latter only slightly; one of the fatalities had also been classified as an *accident* and another as *self-inflicted*.

On or about March 10 the unit had retired to the area of Écoivres-St-Éloi, there to provide working-parties for various tasks as directed from above, but also to be instructed in the use of enemy weaponry, particularly his machine-guns.

(Right above and right: *The village of St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later: The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partially destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)

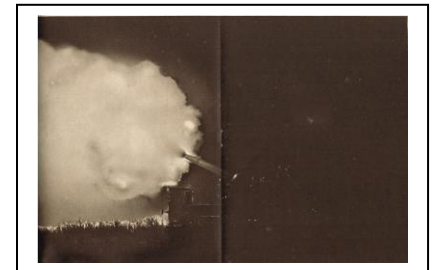


(Right below: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap – the ‘tump’ - was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)



There had followed a further nine days in the trenches, just as non-belligerent as before, before a return to training at Écoivres. The work assigned to the Battalion appears at this point to have increased in its intensity – at least the War Diarist seems to have thought so – much of it not just the manipulating of stores and munitions, but also the excavation of trenches and tunnels. And by that time word had been making the rounds of an upcoming attack.

As the days had passed the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier, on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion having described it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans would have been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had thrown retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had also been very busy.



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

On April 8... *In the evening ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies special carrying party, 27 O.Rs. strong, stretcher-bearing party, 57 O.Rs. strong...and remainder of H.Q. details arrived in the trenches. A hot meal was given to all, and they then proceeded to get into the assembly positions. (Excerpt from War Diary entry of April 8)*

(continued)

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be 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 *Great 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 had 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 having acted as a single, autonomous entity – with a British Division under Canadian command – had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants*.

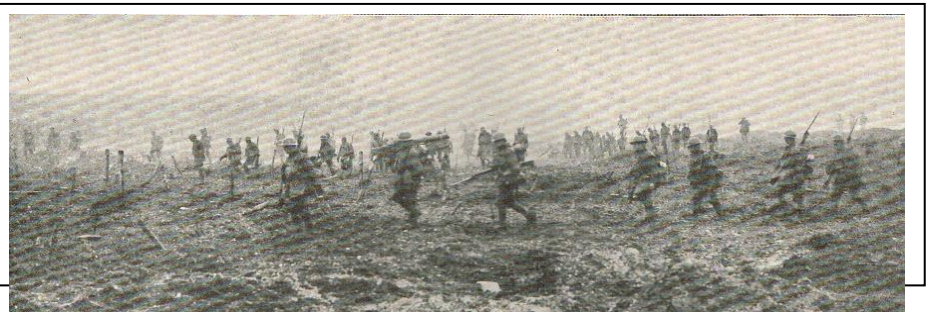
**It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade to be employed on April 9 – also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*



The Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions had been handed responsibility for the *Ridge* itself; to their immediate right had been the 2nd Canadian Division, attacking in the area of the village of Thélus on the southern slope; and to the right again the 1st Canadian Division – of which the 5th Battalion was a component - had been ordered to clear the area lower down the slope again towards the village of Roclincourt.

(Right above: *The monument to the 1st Canadian Division which stands just outside the village of Thélus: It was placed there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017*)

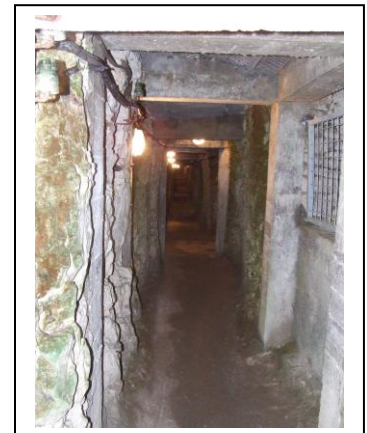
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, equipped - or burdened - with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



(continued)

(Right: *Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

On April 10 the Canadians had finished clearing the area of *Vimy Ridge* of the few remaining pockets of resistance and had begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks. There had on that day been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved impossible, due as much to the inclement weather as to anything else. Thus the Germans had closed the breach and the conflict was once more to revert to one of inertia.



Having moved up from tunnels and dug-outs, the 5th Battalion had been in position in its assembly trenches by one o'clock in the morning of April 9. Four hours and thirty minutes later the creeping barrage had opened and the attacking forces had left their trenches and then advanced towards the enemy positions. Forty minutes later the Battalion's first objective – the so-called *Black Line* – had been taken.

The advance was to continue and by nine o'clock that morning the *Red Line* had been reached and occupied. There the Battalion was to remain until six in the evening at which time it had been relieved and had retired as far as the *Black Line*, there to consolidate.

The War Diarist was to later estimate the number of casualties by that time as having been fourteen officers and three-hundred fifty *other ranks*.



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

Three days later the 5th Battalion had still reportedly been in the *Black Line*. The momentum of the first day had not been followed up on the days following: orders had been to consolidate any gains in the expectation of German counter-attacks; not only that, the ground had been transformed into a morass such that it had proved more than difficult to move guns, munitions and material from the rear and up to the forward areas.

(Right: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear area during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)

Thus the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days and by the end of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.



(continued)

During the *Battle of Arras*, the success at *Vimy Ridge* had been almost the sole exception to the rule*, the rule being costly engagements more often than not accomplishing little or nothing. At Arleux-en-Gohelle on April 28 some ground had been gained by the Canadian attackers but at great sacrifice. The confrontation at Fresnoy was to be otherwise; the losses there had also been heavy – and the Germans had eventually retained the village.

**This was so not only for the Canadians. The British and Australians experienced bloody reverses, not to forget the Newfoundland Regiment and its four-hundred eighty-seven casualties on April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux.*

(Right: *These are some of the outskirts of the city of Lens; the caption reads simply: A northern sector held by the Canadians – from Le Miroir*)



The remainder of the month of June and then all of July had comprised once again the rotations of the troops into the front, support and reserve positions. It was to be the month of August before a further concerted effort had been demanded of the Canadian Corps, and it was also to be in the same general area, albeit a little to the north of *Vimy Ridge*, in the northern outskirts of the mining-centre and city of Lens.

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



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

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

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire across No-Man’s Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

Yet it had been high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.



(Preceding page: *The gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute.* – photograph from 1914)

Objectives were to be limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. However, due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were to be launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, which was to employ newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy on several occasions. *Hill 70* was to remain in Canadian hands.

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



It was to the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions that had been allotted the responsibility of the capture of *Hill 70*, and the 5th Battalion was thus to play its role. By August 13 units of the 1st Canadian Division had taken their place in front of the village of Loos.

(Right below: *The remnants of the village of Loos as it was already in early 1915: The pit-head(s?) known as Tower Bridge stand in the background.* – from Le Miroir)

The following day's entry of the 5th Battalion War Diary reads partially thus: *After dark the battalion moved out in front to the Front Line, digging themselves in ready for the attack...*



Then, on August 15... *Sharp at 4.25 a.m., the barrage opened up and the attack was launched. Two minutes afterwards, the men began to advance, and the German Front Line was taken with very little enemy opposition and very few casualties...*

...‘C’ and ‘D’ companies having taken their objectives, dug-in about 40 yards past the old German Front Line, which was afterwards heavily shelled by the enemy. ‘A’ and ‘B’ companies, following up the barrage had a large number of casualties from Machine Gun Fire before reacing (sic) their objective...

The casualties sustained in capturing this line were about 125 men.

Shortly after the Line had been taken, and the work of consolidation started, the enemy commenced shelling it, and from then on, gave the Line no peace. (Excerpts from the Report of Operation of August 14th – 18th 1917, as contained in the Appendices of the Battalion War Diary)



(Right above: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir*)

It was the night of August 16 before the 5th Battalion had been relieved to fall back behind the new Canadian positions; but it then was to be another twenty-four hours before the unit had been further withdrawn, on this occasion to fall back from the field entirely, to the rear at Les Brébis.

By this time the casualty count had increased to thirteen officers and three-hundred fifty-two *other ranks*.

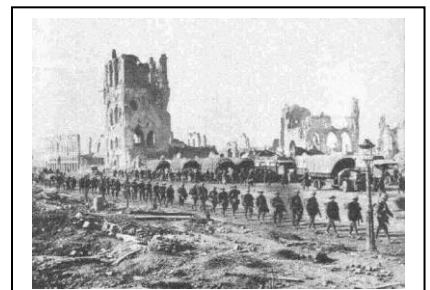
This Canadian-led campaign had apparently been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium had been proceeding less well than predicted and the High Command had by this time been looking for reinforcements to make good its by-then exorbitant losses.

The Australians and New Zealanders – stationed further to the south than the Canadians - and then the Canadians themselves, were to be ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadian Corps had been obliged to abandon its plans. There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the *Lens-Béthune Sectors* and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area.

On most days, according to the Battalion War Diary, it was the artillery which fought it out – but, of course, the infantry was often the target.

Even though it had been known that the Canadians were to be transferred north into Belgium, for the 5th Battalion there was to be a nine-week interlude between the action at *Hill 70* and the transfer to its next theatre of operations. During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches had still been the rule - with several exceptions when the unit had been retired to areas behind the lines. This had been particularly for training, of course, although it was also apparent from the Battalion War Diary entries that sports were being considered more and more to be a morale booster among the troops.

On October 19 of 1917 the Canadians of the 5th Battalion had been ordered north into Belgium and once more into the *Ypres Salient* which the unit had left some fourteen months before. Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the last day of that July – has since that time come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – at least was later *ostensibly* professed to have been - one of the British Army's main objectives.



(Right above: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

(Right: *Somewhere, possibly anywhere or almost everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)



From the time that the Canadians had first entered the fray, it was they who had shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which had spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse had been true with troops of the the 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



(Right above: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *Canadian artillery troops manhandling a gun into position ‘somewhere in Flanders’ during Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)



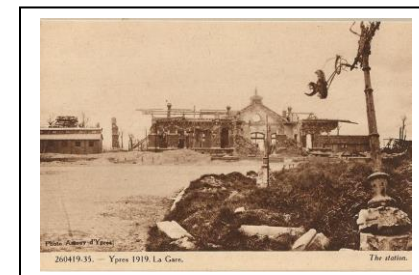
On October 19 the 5th Battalion had begun to make its way on foot north from Houdain to the area of Thiennes where it had arrived two days later. On the following day it was to be on its way again, having undertaken a five-hour march to its destination, Ferme Creve Court (*the spelling is that of the War Diarist*), where it was to remain until November 4.

On that November day the Battalion had entrained at Ebbilinghem station at six in the morning to cross the Franco-Belgian frontier before having then de-trained at the community of Brandhoek four hours later. From there it had been a half-hour march before *Red Rose Camp* was to be reached, a mixture... of huts, tents and wrecked houses... which was now to be the unit’s home for the next three days.



(Right above: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole - at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

(Right: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the 5th Battalion detrained – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)



On October 7 the 5th Battalion had returned to the railway station at Brandhoek for the short train journey to Ypres. The station at Ypres is just outside its southern walls, thus the unit would have passed through the *Lille Gate* to find its new quarters in the now non-existent city’s cellars and dugouts.

This stay was to be of only a single day’s duration: On October 8 the 5th Battalion had crossed the city – perhaps emulating the troops in the image of an earlier page - in a north-easterly direction to the community of St-Jean (*Sint-Jan*) in the outskirts.

An attack by enemy aeroplanes on the following morning, October 9, having been beaten off by the fire of several machine-guns, in the afternoon the unit had made its way towards the front, to Brigade Support, Meetcheele(?) in the vicinity of the *Belvedere Spur*.

Although serving only in support, during the following days the 5th Battalion – its four Companies having been ordered to act independently wherever and whenever necessary – was heavily involved in concert with the 7th and 8th Battalions which were to deliver an attack on the morning of October 10.

The unit had already been the target of the enemy guns during the night of October 9, and had thus suffered a goodly number of casualties.



(Right above: *In Tyne Cot Cemetery, graves surround a German strong-point which once protected the approaches to the village of Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)

These losses were to continue on the day of the attack put in by the 7th and 8th Battalions, these casualties, it would seem, to have been mostly due to the German guns: ‘B’ Company was reportedly down to thirty men; ‘C’ Company could muster only forty.

(Right below: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument – this is the ground up which the Canadians fought during those weeks of October and November of 1917. – photograph from 2010*)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist appears to have voiced no opinion as to the success or otherwise of the action. If it were a victory of sorts, then it would seem to have been a pyrrhic one as the 5th Battalion – *in support* – had incurred some three-hundred twenty casualties* during those days. It was to be relieved by the 58th Battalion at ten o’clock in the late evening of November 11.



**The Canadian 8th Battalion was to retire from the field about two-hundred twenty strong – less than company strength.*

Having retired to the camp at St-Jean early on November 12, the 5th Battalion had then returned to *Red Rose Camp*, Brandhoek, later that same day. There it had remained for three days before having been bussed south-west across the border into France on November 15 and to the vicinity of the community of Merville. From there the unit had marched southwards in stages until, one week later, on November 22, it was to be reported as having been posted into the forward trenches at Liévin, a westerly suburb of Lens.

Life for the personnel of the 5th Battalion had now once again reverted to the everyday wretchedness of the front, support and reserve areas – wretched perhaps, but also perhaps now quite welcome after *Passchendaele*.

(continued)

Welcome as well after the sacrifices and losses of the month of November were to be the re-enforcements which had been arriving to bolster the strength of the depleted unit. It was on December 3, of course, that a draft of one-hundred forty-two *other ranks* had reported *to duty* at the *Souchez Huts* from the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, with one of that number having been Private James Edward O'Connor.



(Right above: *Not far removed from the Canadian Souchez Huts encampment were the remnants of the village of Souchez itself, before the Great War a community of some twelve-hundred persons. By the autumn of 1915 this is what it had already been reduced to. – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

Although the officer responsible for the War Diary appears to have neglected to enter it in his journal, the month of December was to offer something a little different to all the Canadian formations serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17 and participation, in at least *some* units, were to be in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

The winter of 1917-1918 passed very much in the manner as had the previous winters of the *Great War*: in stagnation. Any infantry activity tended to be local: ever-present patrols and the occasional raid – *still* an activity much in favour with the British High Command. The days, for the most part, were reported in the War Diaries as... *quiet* – the exceptions to the rule being described as... *very quiet*.

And most casualties were, during these so-called *quieter* periods, due as ever to the enemy's artillery-fire, to his snipers and now, to the ever-increasing menace of his aerial bombers.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers standing in front of a temporary theatre peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)



While the winter of 1917-1918 was again to be relatively tranquil – as had been the previous winters of the *Great War* – it was also to be a time for the opposing forces to gather their strength and to make preparations for the months ahead.

It was to be on the first day of spring of that 1918 that the German plans were put into operation.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans were to come to victory early in the year of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the *War*, they delivered a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', launched on March 21.

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops where they were stationed adjacent to their French allies.

(Right below: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was the result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.



**A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*

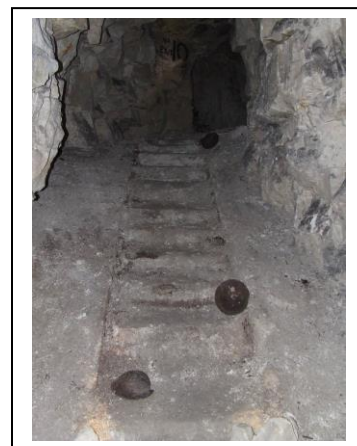
(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



As was the case with a great number of the Canadian units, it appears to have been several days before even the news of the German offensive filtered through, let alone there being any sense of great urgency. In the case of Private O’Connor’s 5th Battalion it was not until the 25th of the month that the War Diary entry for the day makes mention of it: *Battalion was ordered to “Stand To” and be ready to move at 6 a.m. tomorrow. A hostile attack is expected in the morning.*

On the morrow the... *Battalion “Stood To” during the day ready to move off at 1 hour’s notice.* But the anticipated attack did not materialize and orders were then received to be at Écoivres on the following morning. The unit having arrived there, two days were thereupon spent frantically driving and marching around the country side in the rain, ordered and counter-ordered, losing men and equipment, until, on March 29, the 5th Battalion found itself billeted in the community of Berneville.

A succession of postings followed, all apparently still in expectation of a further German offensive – the one in Flanders was launched as late as April 9: the Battalion moved to Arras (*Ronville Caves*), then to St-Nicholas, back to Arras, thence to the front line and to Bois de la Maison Blanche.



(continued)

(Preceding page: One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system - hewn in the rock under much of Arras - almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. It was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions. – photograph from 2012(?))

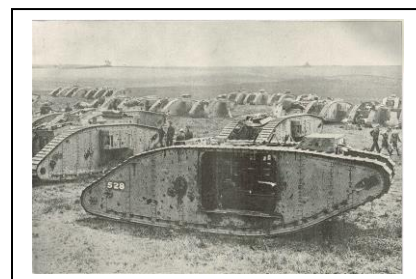
(Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for April 21, 1918): Enemy artillery fire was fairly active on area immediately in rear of Battalion, apparently ranging on ROCLINCOURT-BLANGY Road...and...on Railway Bridge over ST. LAURENT-FAMPOUX Road. Spasmodic shelling of dead ground...where our Field Hows. (howitzers) are located... Casualties. 1 O.R. wounded.

But the services of Private O'Connor and the 5th Battalion were not to be required to staunch the German flood on either of the two fronts, nor would be those of any other Canadian unit. The enemy was to be held in both the south and the north, and now it would soon be the turn of the Allies to pass to the offensive.

After the German advances of March and April a relative calm had descended on the Western Front as the German threat faded; the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there had been nothing of any military significance lost to the Allies on either of the two fronts: in the south the Allies retained the railway network at Amiens; in the north, none of the Channel ports had been threatened.

Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

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



Thus the British fronts were to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right above: In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'. Many of the troops to be involved in the fighting from this time onwards underwent training in the company of tanks. – from Illustration)

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



(continued)

It was to be on the night of August 1-2 that the 5th Battalion began its transfer from the Arras Sector to the chosen theatre of battle to the east of Amiens. Relieved on the evening of August 1, the first stage had ended at four in the morning of the next day in huts on the main Arras to St-Pol Road.

Apparently the troops were in good spirits having conducted a successful raid on July 26, and were excited at the prospect of...*something big* – even though nothing appears to have been known about it at that stage*.

**The 5th Battalion had not been the only Canadian unit on the move at this time. Within a matter of days, at the end of July and beginning of August of 1918, almost the entire Canadian Corps had been transferred from the sectors north of and around Arras to face the Germans on the front which they had established at the time of their offensive four months earlier.*

The majority of the Canadian forces had passed behind – to the west of - the city of Amiens before then turning eastward and marching during the hours of darkness, thus to ensure surprise. This it had succeeded in doing, as the events of the few following days were to prove.

(Right: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918. – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site)*



August 3 was to be a busy – and popular - day: *Pay parades – baths – Clothing parades...* then a four-hour march followed by a train-ride to an unknown destination. This was a twelve-hour, overnight, journey which terminated at eight o'clock the following morning in the community of Senarpont*. From now on the Canadians of the 5th Battalion would be continuing to their destination on foot.

**That day, August 4, marked the fourth anniversary of the declaration of war.*

The overnight marches continued for three more days until, at six o'clock on the morning of August 7, the destination of the 5th Battalion and of Private O'Connor, le Bois de Gentelles (*Gentelles Wood*) was reached. There...*in a system of trenches on the outskirts of the wood...a well-earned rest was indulged in.*

At 9.30 p.m. the Battalion moved off to take up the assembly positions, which had been previously reconnoitred during the day by their Officers. (Excerpt from 5th Battalion War Diary entry of August 7, 1918)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist then continues with a narrative of the events of the next morning: *A peculiar and unmistakable atmosphere of success pervaded all ranks. This was remarked upon by many. Everything was quiet and it was evident that the enemy had no inkling of the presence of storming troops. Whirring and humming Motors of the tanks could be heard drawing nearer and nearer, and the men were warned to lookout (sic), for where they would cross the trench.*

(continued)

One of our planes roared across to the enemy lines, the rum ration was issued, officers warned the men to fix bayonets in readiness to go over, an occasional enemy Very light (sic) soared into the sky, our plane came tearing back, then “CRASH”, like one gun, the ear-splitting, devastating barrage opened, and fell on the enemy’s lines. It must have sounded to him like the “crack of doom”.

Up and over went the Battalion, tense and eager, well in hand, confident, one might say joyous, that feeling of assured success became intensified. There was a heavy ground mist which made it impossible to see 25 yards ahead, but in spite of this, well led, the men went ahead unhesitatingly, and it was necessary to restrain them, so keen were they...



(Right above: A group of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background – from Le Miroir)

Thus passed the first minutes of the attack of August 8: The confidence which the writer had seen in the faces of his men had not been misplaced; it seems that most things would go well on that day – and the next. Whereas in past campaigns the gains, if any, had been measured in yards, those of *this* battle were being counted in kilometres*.

**Since the autumn of 1914, the exceptions to this rule had been the first day of the First Battle of Cambrai, November 20, 1917, and the opening days of the German offensive on the Somme of March and April, 1918.*

The casualties, however, were not light – and they were to become heavier – and in some cases they were not incomparable to those incurred during 2nd Ypres, the Somme, Arras, and Passchendaele: the 5th Battalion was to count three-hundred six, *all ranks*, on those first two days alone.

The community of Warvillers had been taken on August 9, the second day of the fighting. There the Battalion was to remain as it was now to be the turn of units of the 4th Canadian Division to leap-frog through and to continue the drive. The 5th Battalion was now to re-organize, re-equip, and to receive two large re-enforcement drafts, on August 14 and 15.



(Right above: Canadian and German wounded from the first days of the battle – some cases more serious than others - waiting to be evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir)

It was then to be yet a further two days before the 5th Battalion resumed its advance when the entire 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade relieved the 9th Brigade (also of Canadian Infantry) on the night of August 16-17. The initial momentum of the push had slowed after the success of the first days: bringing forward guns, munitions and supplies in the quantities necessary was not easy; fatigue was a factor; time was spent consolidating the newly-won positions; and the German soldier, formidable and skilled, was still willing to fight and was yet capable of inflicting punishment on those facing him.

The 5th Battalion was back in Warvillers at about mid-day of August 21, its place having been taken in the line by a regiment of French troops. This was the first phase in the transfer of the 5th Battalion back whence it had come only two weeks earlier. In fact, the entire Canadian Corps was to retrace its steps – in the same manner, by night, and by routes well to the west, before being carried by bus and train – back to the Arras Sector*.



**Most of the retiring Canadian units were to be replaced by French troops.*

(Right above: French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix, just to the west of Rosières, the French relieving Canadian troops towards the end of the second week of the battle: Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground. – photograph from 2017)

Only days hence, the Canadians in tandem with British troops were to be in action once more, in another theatre, driving along the axis of the main Arras-Cambrai Road, through the battlefields of 1917. This advance was to end only on November 11, when the War-ending Armistice would come into effect.

However, in the meantime, there was work to be done. On the night of August 26-27 – in fact at three o'clock in the morning – Private O'Connor's Battalion reached its destination, billets at Anzin just to the north-west of Arras.

But the first Canadian troops to return from the *Third Battle of Amiens* to the *Arras Sector* had not been the 5th Battalion and the 1st Canadian Division. By the time that Private O'Connor and his unit were settling down into those billets in Anzin, the *Battle of the Scarpe* had already been ongoing for almost a day, the 3rd and 4th Divisions of the Canadian Corps having advanced some five kilometres on August 26, and having captured Monchy-le-Preux* on that same day.

**This was where, on April 14 of 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment had lost four-hundred eighty-seven killed, wounded and missing in a failed attack on German positions.*

(Right: The re-constructed village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen from the western side: A bronze Newfoundland Caribou stands in its centre to commemorate the events and sacrifices of April 14, 1917. – photograph from 2014)



By early in the morning of August 29 the 5th Battalion had moved through Arras and along the main road leading to Cambrai. It had then taken up support positions in the area of Vis-en-Artois where it would still be on the next day while troops of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade advanced almost two kilometres, encountering little or no opposition.

(continued)

(Right: *Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery: The cemetery contains 2,369 dead of the Great War – originally mostly from 1918 - of whom only 885 have been identified. – photograph from 2010*)



August 31 passed in exactly the same manner, the 5th Battalion still in support and still awaiting orders to advance. During this three-day period the German artillery, usually so ferociously efficient, was reportedly almost totally ineffective: the entire casualty count of the Battalion for that period amounted to five men wounded and two mules killed.

On September 1, Private O'Connor's unit had attacked. The German response, however, had not been as ineffectual as that of the previous days when the advance had literally been a walk-over. The Battalion now lost heavily to mortar-fire, to rifle-fire and most particularly to machine-gun fire. In the end the enemy had been forced to retire but apparently, he was still far from finished as a fighting force, as the two-hundred thirty-five casualties of the day were to testify.



(Right above: *Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon. – photograph from 2015*)

However, the Canadians and the accompanying British forces were not finished either. Later in the day of that September 1...*Operation Order No. 314...was received, stating that on the 2nd. September, 1918, the Canadian Corps would break through the DROCOURT-QUÉANT Line.* The attack was to be carried out by the 2nd. Canadian Infantry Brigade – Private O'Connor's 5th Battalion one of its four such units – in tandem with the 3rd and 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades on the right and left respectively, the operation to be assisted by tanks.

(Right below: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir*)

At five o'clock on the following morning the barrage opened with a roar, thus heralding the attack, and the first troops of the three Canadian infantry Brigades moved forward. Once again, in places, the German defences held – in particular those manned by their machine-gunners who neither gave nor asked any quarter – but the *Drocourt-Quéant Line*, an element of the defensive system known to the British and Commonwealth forces as the *Hindenburg Line*, was breached, the enemy was again obliged to retire eastward in the direction of the Canal du Nord and, on that evening, Private O'Connor's 5th Battalion was consolidating its newly-won positions in the area of Dury.



(continued)

On September 3, reported by the War Diarist as a relatively quiet day...*the enemy artillery fire being of a feeble and desultory nature. About 2.30. p.m. orders were received from Brigade that the 5th. Battalion (Western Cavalry) would move forward and occupy trenches... An early tea was prepared and the battalion moved off about 4.30 p.m... Eventually the trenches were reached about 9.00 p.m. They were made wide and shallow and littered with the bodies of the enemy...*



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial to those who fought at the breaking of the Drocourt-Quéant Line in early September of 1918: It stands to the side of the main Arras-Cambrai road in the vicinity of the village of Dury and of Mount Dury. – photograph from 2016)*



(Right: *The caption to this photograph reads: Prisoners taken by the Canadians at Quéant – from Le Miroir)*

(Right below: *German artillery positions which had been overrun by the Canadian advances during early September of 1918 – from Le Miroir)*

By now the pursuing Canadian troops were approaching the western bank of the Canal du Nord and were digging in, expectant that the Germans would make a serious stand at this point. Not that this was to be an immediate concern for Private O'Connor and his comrades-in-arms as they were ordered relieved on that same evening by the 27th Battalion.



The 5th Battalion thus retired along the route by which it had arrived and by eleven-thirty that evening Private O'Connor was preparing to spend the night billeted in a shell hole.

The tranquillity of the night was to be minimal as enemy planes were busy dropping bombs into the Canadian rear areas. Eight of these projectiles, apparently attracted by the unit's cooking fires, were aimed in their direction but with little consequence other than a lack of sleep – nothing unusual there. Those cooking fires had been preparing the Battalion breakfast which was ready, despite the German Air Force's intrusion, by four o'clock in the morning. A few more minutes' sleep was snatched by some, after which there was a march to Chérisy and a bus-ride through Arras to the village of Wanquetin, some sixteen kilometres to the west.

(Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 4, 1918) *...At 3.00.p.m. the busses stopped just outside the village of WANQUETIN, and the battalion debussed and marched into the village where they were soon established in billets. The feeling one has passing along peaceful country roads and quiet villages occupied by civilians, and not a gun to be heard, is really only to be appreciated by the front line soldier. A load seems to slide from him, nerves and muscles relax, and he seems to have stepped into another world, and, indeed, in a sense, he has.*

(continued)

The whole feeling of safety and relaxation is wonderful, and, in a short time the weeks of strain and fighting he has endured are almost obliterated, and the outlook upon life in general assumes its normal poise. ...one would hardly recognize the happy, care-free men as the wear war-worn troops of a few hours ago...

This *Utopia* as seen through the eyes of the 5th Battalion War Diarist was to last some sixteen days, until the morning of September 20, when his unit boarded a train for the journey back into that other world.

By that evening the personnel of the unit were busy constructing billets from the remains of demolished Nissen Huts – corrugated metal and wood – in the area of Mercatel, to the south of Arras, and still some distance from the forward area. There the unit remained for five days.

By this time Private O'Connor had received a promotion. Apparently a certain Lance Corporal Black had recently been admitted into a field ambulance for treatment to an undisclosed condition. To fill the void created by his absence, on September 6 Private O'Connor had been appointed to the same rank, although in an *acting* capacity*.

**Unlike many of those who were promoted to an acting rank, Lance Corporal O'Connor received the five-cents-per-diem raise in pay due to his new rank.*

On September 25 in the morning, orders were received to move up into the area of Hendecourt to relieve the 13th Battalion. *...the Battalion started moving from this area (Mercatel) at 7.15 p.m., arriving in the new area at 12.30 a.m. on the 26th... The Main roads and other approaches to the Forward area were literally packed with all kinds of traffic, a continual stream coming and going which rendered it very difficult for the companies to keep in touch with each other, more especially as the night was lit only by the stars, the light of which, though making marching far from easy, evidently suited the large numbers of enemy planes which visited our lines, over portions of which they made themselves felt as well as heard* (Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 25, 1918).

The morrow was a day of preparation: *...All units were early astir preparing for the move into the Assembly Positions which it is expected will take place tonight. By the afternoon everyone was complete in Battle Equipment, ammunition, water bottles ground flares, Very Lights and bombs, etc. having been issued to companies. Operation Order...for the impending attack was issued in the afternoon, and the Battalion moved off to take up ASSEMBLY POSITIONS...at 11.30 p.m.* (Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 26, 1918).

September 27, 1918, was the day on which the four Canadian Divisions stormed the Canal du Nord. A part of it was as yet unfinished at the time and thus devoid of water, but this was not the only point at which a crossing was undertaken. At the same time, other forces to the south were also attacking the German positions on the Canal St-Quentin and, two days later, a further offensive was to be launched in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium.



(Preceding page: German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai – from Le Miroir)

The 5th Battalion was not in the first wave of the assault and the Canal was already in Canadian hands by the time that Lance Corporal O'Connor crossed the waterway at eleven o'clock in the morning. His unit was to...*cross the CANAL DU NORD in the rear of the 8th Canadian Infantry Battalion...*and to make its way forward to pre-arranged jumping-off positions. Once in position, the Battalion was then to pass through the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade and deliver an attack on a two-Company front. It was to advance on Haynecourt and, having done so, was then to allow the 10th Canadian Infantry Battalion to pass through to continue the advance.

(Right: The same area of the Canal du Nord as it is almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it – photograph from 2015)



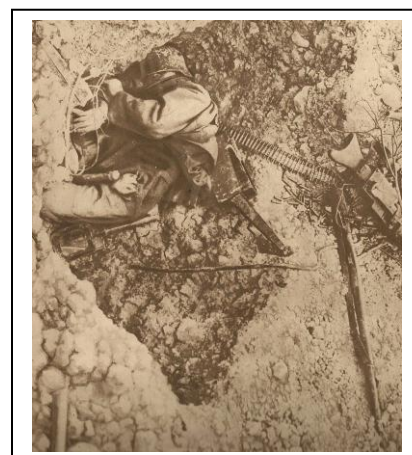
The 5th Battalion was then to follow the 10th Battalion to the final objective...*2000 yards beyond HAYNECOURT...* where it would aid in the consolidation of the captured positions. This was reported as accomplished by seven-thirty that evening.

However, on the following day, September 28, the success of September 27 was not to be repeated: the pre-attack barrage was too weak; the German machine-gunners had moved into dominant positions on the flanks during the hours of darkness; and the opposing wire had not been cut. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the attacking units of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade on that day and further planned infantry operations were revised into an attack, supported by a British Division, postponed until the next morning.

ZERO HOUR was to be at eight o'clock.

But it went all badly once more, for the most part due to the German machine-gunners who stopped the advance of the British Division on the left and were thus in a flanking position when the troops of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade moved forward.

(Excerpt from the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for September 29, 1918) ...the enemy were bringing very heavy machine-gun fire to bear on this – the left – flank. The 8th Battalion throughout suffered very heavy casualties, and it was decided any further advance would only mean the useless waste of men. The 5th Bn. in close support had not been involved in the attack, as the opposition was entirely consisting of machine-gun fire to the flank... At noon the O.C. 8th Battalion received orders...to sit tight...



(Right: A German machine-gunner who also gave his all – from Illustration)

(continued)

It would seem however, on that September 29, that the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*) had not been entirely passive, witness the following casualty report: *“Killed in Action” While taking part with his Company in an attack South East of Epinay he was instantly killed by a high explosive shell.*

Lance Corporal O’Connor’s part in the *Great War* had come to its close.

The author has found no information *a propos* the family of Lance Corporal O’Connor either in Newfoundland or elsewhere. He was reported as having been *killed in action*, as seen in the document above, on September 29, 1918.

James Edward O’Connor had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-nine years and eight months: date of birth at Boni Vista Bay, Newfoundland, October 13, 1896 (date and venue from attestation papers).

Lance Corporal James Edward O’Connor 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.

