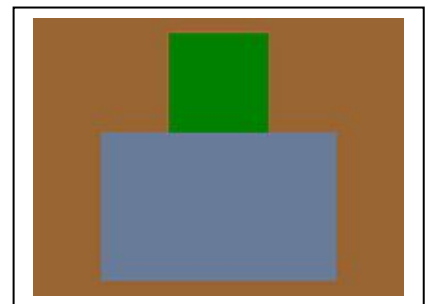


Private Michael Bennett O'Dea, Number 100394 of the 49th Battalion (*Edmonton Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 49th Battalion (Edmonton Regiment) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)



(continued)

His occupations prior to military service recorded as being those of both *bridgeman* and *carpenter*, Michael Bennett O'Dea appears to have left no history behind him *a propos* his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Alberta. All that may be said with certainty is that he was in the city of Edmonton during the month of July, 1915.

It was on the third day of that July that he presented himself in the city for enlistment, for medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force* – and also for attestation. The formalities of the occasion were brought to a conclusion on the same day by Major George Durrand of the 66th Overseas Battalion (*Edmonton Guards*) who declared – on paper – that...*Michael O'Dea...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private O'Dea was thereupon immediately *taken on strength* by Major Durrand's newly-authorized 66th Battalion (*Edmonton Guards*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The 66th Battalion now trained for at least a part of the following nine months at *Sarcy Camp* near the city of Calgary. It was, one must suppose, at times in or near to the city of Edmonton itself* since the Battalion appears to have boasted an ice-hockey team in 'B' Division of the Edmonton District League, finishing fourth during that winter season of 1915-1916.

**Perhaps in either the Prince of Wales Armoury or the Connaught Armoury – the Duke of was the Governor-general of Canada at the time: neither building seems to wish to claim the honour for itself in articles read.*

Maybe it was nothing but coincidence that it was just following the playoffs that Private O'Dea's Battalion took ship in the harbour at Halifax, the date being April 28, 1916, - a second source cites the unlikely 24th – on which the *Edmonton Guards* embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*. The unit was not to sail unaccompanied. Also on the vessel taking passage to the United Kingdom was a number of other units: the 4th Divisional Cyclists Company; the 3rd Draft of the 10th Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles; the 81st and 83rd Battalions of Canadian Infantry; and the 2nd Draft of the 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion.

(Right: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. Olympic was sister ship of Britannic, to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean in November of 1916, and also of the ill-starred Titanic. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)



Olympic sailed on May 1 and six days following - on May 7, although in fact having arrived just before midnight on the 6th - was to dock in the English west-coast port city of Liverpool. From there the 66th Battalion was sped south-eastward by train, likely to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, established on the Dover Straits just to the south of the Kentish harbour and town of Folkestone.

(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)



The 66th Battalion was to undergo two months of training before it suffered the fate common to many of the Canadian units arriving in the United Kingdom.

The Canadian government on the outset of war had envisaged the formation of some two-hundred sixty battalions for service overseas. Whether the authorities had the idea that all of them were to eventually fight in the war is not clear but, as it transpired, only about fifty ever did – four battalions per brigade; three brigades per division; four divisions*.

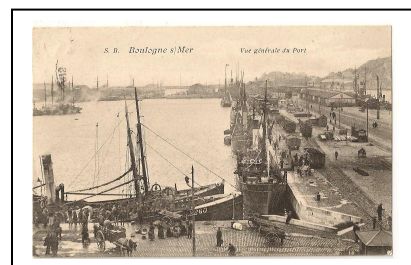
**A fifth division was formed but it remained in the United Kingdom during the conflict as a reserve and training unit.*

Thus the men of the 66th were parcelled out as re-enforcements to other battalions as and when the need arose. Then in July of 1916, the remainder of its personnel was absorbed by the 9th Infantry Reserve Battalion. The 66th Battalion continued to exist, but only on paper until 1920 when it was officially disbanded.

Private O’Dea, however, was in France at the time of that transfer to the 9th Reserve Battalion*. *Taken on strength* on June 6 by the 49th Battalion (*Edmonton Regiment*) – at least on paper – two days following he was reported as being at the Canadian Base Depot situated in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. A single day later again, on June 9, he was despatched from there to join his unit *in the field*.



**If indeed the 66th was stationed at Shorncliffe at the time of Private O’Dea’s departure, then he almost certainly passed through Folkestone on the English side, and the coastal town of Boulogne on the French side of the English Channel on his way to Le Havre.*



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

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

While his personal file cites June 18 as having been the day on which he joined his new unit, the 49th Battalion War Diary says otherwise: *11th – 415 men reinforcements from the 66th Battalion arrived**. – There is mention only of eleven officer re-enforcements on June 18 at a time when the unit was re-building at Camp ‘C’ in the area of Winnezele, Belgium.

**This date appears to be the more likely; having left Le Havre on June 9, the draft was surely not to have spent nine days, travelling aimlessly, before reporting to duty.*

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



Four-hundred fifteen is not far removed from fifty per cent of Battalion strength. As will be seen, Private O’Dea was arriving at a time when the 49th was recovering from the shattering experience of the fighting at *Mount Sorrel*.

* * * * *

The 49th Battalion (*Edmonton Regiment*) had disembarked in France in the port of Boulogne on October 9 of 1915. The unit was a component of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 3rd Canadian Division*. Days later it was in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and on October 16, had entered the trenches of the *Western Front* for the first time, on the southern end of the line in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, in a region that English-speakers call Flanders.

**Even though many of its units had already been serving on the Continent by that time, the 3rd Canadian Division did not officially come into being until mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916.*

For the following five months the personnel of the 49th Battalion was to remain in the same area. During that period the Battalion War Diary entries for each day look remarkably alike – documenting the everyday rigours, routines and perils of life in the trenches*.

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

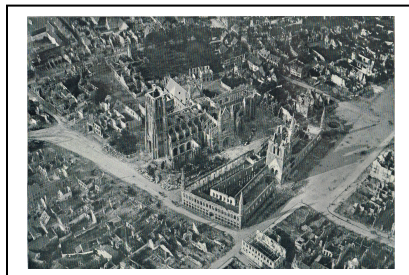
(Right above: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration*)

On March 20-21, the situation changed – if not radically then seriously – for the 49th Battalion when it marched from its former sector to the town of Poperinghe. There it took a train for the short journey to Ypres. The unit had been transferred to the *Ypres Salient*.

The venerable medieval city of Ypres – today Ieper - even by this early date in the War had been transformed into rubble by the everyday German artillery bombardments and by two major battles – to both of which it had lent its name – that had already taken place*. It had been the second of these confrontations which had seen the first use of gas – chlorine - on a large scale, during which the Canadian 1st Division had distinguished itself.

**There were to be three more before the war ended.*

(Right: A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres in 1915 – the city is described as ‘morte’ (dead) – from *Illustration*)



The 3rd Division took its place in the line in an area just to the south-east of the ramparts of the city, in the trenches at places such as the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway dugouts*, *Hill 60* and *Maple Copse*.

It took just twenty-four hours for the enemy artillery to welcome them: 49th Battalion casualties for March 22 were two killed, two wounded, two shell-shocked; for March 23-24, four wounded; for March 25, three killed, thirteen wounded, ten wounded and shell-shocked. Thus passed its first tour in the *Salient* trenches.

Worse was to come.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for that afore-mentioned area of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



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

(Right: *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*)



The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground.

Badly organized, the operation was a horrendous experience, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

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

On June 2 the 49th Battalion had been in the rear area. Orders which soon arrived to be *prepared* to move were followed by others ordering the unit forward. The intensity of the enemy shell-fire was such that the Battalion was obliged to take shelter in the area of those ramparts of Ypres. Later that evening it moved further towards the front so as to be in position for the counter-attack planned for the following morning.



On the 49th Battalion front the counter-offensive was apparently successful... *making substantial gains, attacking with energy and vigour. Battn held all positions throughout 3rd and was relieved at 12 M.N. 4th and 5th...* (Excerpt from 49th Battalion War Diary)



Success is off-times relative: Casualties for the day were fifty-two *killed in action*, two-hundred sixty-four *wounded in action* and sixty-nine *missing in action*.

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



(Right: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Battalion did not participate in any further action at *Mount Sorrel*, not even in the successful final Canadian counter-attack of June 13 which restored the situation to much the way it had been at the outset. The 49th Battalion remained in rest billets until June 20. Those billets were, of course, at Camp ‘C’ where Private O’Dea’s re-enforcement draft reported *to duty* on June 11.

* * * * *

The subsequent weeks were spent in the same sector and in much the same manner as had been the period prior to the engagement, in the everyday drudgery of trench warfare – but likely preferable to the excitement of the battle just fought.

(continued)

On the night August 21-22 the unit was relieved and, having taken the train to travel the fifteen or so kilometres to the town of Poperinghe – where it also had a collective bath – it remained there for a day before setting off for Cassel on August 24. There the personnel was billeted – *poorly*, according to the War Diary - and started to drill on the morrow.

Each Canadian Division in its turn was to be eventually withdrawn from the front area to undergo a period of training. The troops that were to take the Canadians' place in Belgium had been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme*. These units, troops from the British Isles – and a single battalion from the Dominion of Newfoundland – were exhausted and depleted from their recent exertions, and in need of re-enforcement and re-organization.

(Right: *The entrance – recently reconstructed – to the Newfoundland Regiment's 'A' Company quarters in the ramparts of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)



Training for the 49th Battalion continued until September 7 when it packed its baggage, cleaned its billets and marched to the railway-station at Esquelbecq. Having boarded a train which pulled out at one-thirty in the morning of the 8th, the unit travelled overnight to Conteville, in the vicinity of which community it was billeted until September 10.

On that day, Private O'Dea's unit began to march – billeting each night in one of the many communities along the route – until, on September 13, it reached its destination, the military camp at *Tara Hill*, close to not only the provincial town of Albert, but also – it appears all-too uncomfortably so at times - to the German guns.

The *First Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for some 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 only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day 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 who were 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.



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

As the battle had progressed, 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 entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

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

Having arrived as planned at *Tara Hill Camp* on September 13, the 49th Battalion had only forty-eight hours to wait until it was ordered forward. At three o'clock on the afternoon of September 15 it moved into the line, there to await the signal to attack at six-fifteen. The battalion was not alone; on that day, both the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions were involved, as part of a general attack undertaken by an Allied force totalling three Armies.

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

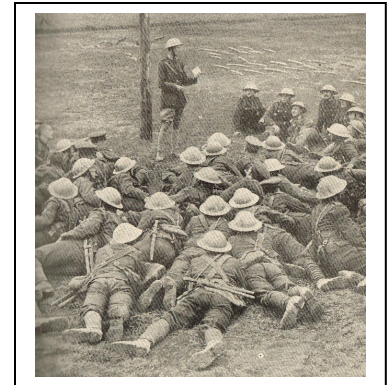
The day was to be one of mixed results and the cost heavy. The Canadian 2nd Division would be successful in its attack in the area of the village of Courcelette and would capture the *Sugar Factory* objective. The 7th Brigade of the 3rd Division – of which the 49th Battalion was a component – was to secure a trench and also a part of a German strong-point; but against a determined opposition it was to find any further advance difficult. So it dug in, to remain *in situ* despite heavy shelling and thus heavy casualties until the 17th and 18th when it was relieved piecemeal and withdrew to *Tara Hill*.

(Right: *Seen from the north, the village of Courcelette just over a century after the events of the 1st Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

Casualties for the four days – and recorded on the 18th - had mounted to forty-three killed, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and nineteen missing.

Private O'Dea's Battalion was back in the front line in early October and then again on October 7. On this second occasion it was to be ordered to attack once again, on October 8, the objective being a German complex known as *Regina Trench* which, up until this time, had resisted all efforts to capture it. The attempt was to be a combined operation, in co-operation with the Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment.

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



Following a short barrage the two battalions advanced - not entirely successfully. The 49th Battalion was caught by machine-gun and rifle fire not only from the front but on both flanks. Any gains were limited. It retired later that day to count the cost: a total of two-hundred twenty-one all ranks.



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

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



On October 10, two days later, the 49th marched out of Albert and away from *First Somme*. The battle still had five weeks to run, but that would be the task for other Canadian units which were even then just still arriving. The Battalion's numbers at the outset of the withdrawal totalled only four-hundred seventeen *all ranks*, well under fifty per-cent of normal battalion strength.

One of the dead was Private O'Dea.

Casualty report: *Previously reported Missing believed Killed, now for official purposes presumed to have died.*

He was wounded while assisting in carrying a wounded comrade to a shell hole in "No Man's Land" during an attack North of Courcellette. He set out to return to our lines in order to get to a dressing station, but he never reached there, and no further information of what ultimately befell him could be obtained.

The son of Michael O'Dea, former farmer (deceased 1907), and of Alice O'Dea (née *Kennedy*)* of St. John's, Newfoundland, he was half-brother to John-Vincent (see below), and brother to Margaret (*Maggie*), later married *Byrne*; to Bridget, later married *Fyme*; to Mary-Ellen, later married *Maher*; to Stephen and to William.

**Alice was the second wife of Michael O'Dea. Bridget Roche, mother of John Vincent O'Dea, had passed away in 1873.*

In fact he was at first reported simply as *wounded*, then *wounded and missing*. Finally Private O'Dea was, on February 5 of 1917... *presumed to have died on or since 8/10/16* – this became official on July 19, 1917.

Michael Bennett O'Dea had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-three years: date of birth (from his attestation papers) in St. John's, Newfoundland, August 3, 1882.

(continued)

Private Michael Bennett O'Dea 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.

