



Private Robert Routledge (found also as *Rutledge*), Number 715500, of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Nine Elms British Cemetery, Poperinghe: Grave Reference IX.F.3..

(Right: The image of the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a farmer, Robert Routledge has left behind him little information a propos his early years in the Dominion of Newfoundland, except that his father – and uncle? – may have been farmers at the east end of the capital city.

Robert Routledge, in the company of his parents, older brother William and perhaps a younger Peter, travelled to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia at some time before the birth of the youngest of the four brothers, Angus, in 1905, in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney where the father of the family, Harry – also found as *Henry* – had by then acquired a job as a crane operator.

By the time that an underage Robert was to enlist* the family had lost its mother – although the details of her death appear not to be available – and at least Harry Rutledge and his son Robert were by that time living with a Mrs. Kate (Frank) Stapleton of 32, Charlotte Road, in the city of Sydney * (see further below).

**As was his father, only some two weeks before his son (see below and further below)*

His first pay records show that it was on December 23 of 1915 that the Canadian Army first began to remunerate Private Routledge for his services to the 106th Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), by which unit he had been *taken on strength* on the same date*.

**His father had undergone enlistment on December 9, also in Sydney. An observer would think that each was aware of the other's undertakings and, given that Harry Routledge was taken on strength by the same 106th Battalion, this was likely so. However, while Private Harry was to name his next-of-kin as his youngest son, Angus, Private Robert submitted the name of Mrs. Frank Stapleton whom he classifies as friend*.*



It was only by the merest stroke of fortune – and not from any of the more obvious sources - that the author became aware of the father-son situation and other information.

(Right above: *The photograph of Private Harry Routledge of the 13th Platoon, 106th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the [www.angelfire](http://www.angelfire.com) web-site - A short history and photographic record 106th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., Nova Scotia Rifles.)*

These first formalities which were to take place in Sydney were accompanied by a medical examination at the same time, a procedure which found Robert Routledge to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. A month and two days later, Private Routledge by then had been despatched south to the town of Truro where, on January 25, 1916, he attested in the presence of a local civic official.

According to an account written by one of the 106th Battalion's recruits, Private Routledge and the other personnel who had enlisted in Cape Breton, having been transferred southward to Truro for the express purpose of, ostensibly, undertaking training, were boarded in either local hotels or in the Y.M.C.A.. Private Routledge had arrived there by March 6 for that was when he had been hospitalized for four days because of tonsillitis.

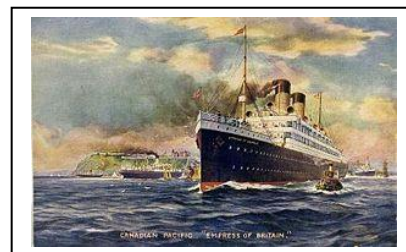
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There was, however, apparently – this from the same source – to be very *little* training undertaken: at Truro there were apparently no barracks, no firing range and no parade ground, and it appears that shovelling snow and marching comprised much of the exercise for the 106th Battalion’s Truro detachment during the first sixth months of the unit’s existence.

It was to be a further five months after that January attestation before all the formalities of Private Routledge’s enlistment were brought to a conclusion on June 28 of that 1916 by the commanding officer of the 106th Battalion, Major – not long afterwards to be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel – Robert Innes, when he declared – on paper – that...*Robert Routledge...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

A further seventeen days after this episode, Private Routledge and his 106th Battalion embarked onto His Majesty’s Transport *Empress of Britain* in the harbour at Halifax. The date was July 15 of 1916.

The unit was not to travel alone during its trans-Atlantic crossing; also taking passage on the vessel were the 93rd and 105th Battalions of Canadian Infantry, the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*), and the 8th Draft of ‘C’ Battery of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.



(Above right: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Wikipedia website.*)

The *Empress* sailed later on the same July 15, and docked some ten days later again in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on July 25, 1916. From there Private Routledge’s unit was transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* which had by that time been established on the Dover Straits in close proximity to the town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent.



Some fourteen weeks following, the mandatory training by then having been completed at *Lower Dibgate Camp*, the 106th Battalion would have been expecting its cross-Channel transfer to active service on the Western Front. But it was not to be*.

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

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas just over 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 aspirations of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front.

By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

By October of 1916 of the *Great War*, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for almost two months during which time it had suffered horrific losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that much of the personnel of the Canadian units which had remained in England was now to be deployed.

(Right: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial* – an unidentified photograph)

On October 5, a number of Private Routledge's comrades-in-arms crossed from Folkestone and through Boulogne on the coast opposite en route to the Continent to serve in units already established there. Private Routledge himself, however – as was the majority of the 106th Battalion - was instead absorbed on that day by the Canadian 40th Reserve Battalion located at *Cæsar's Camp*, another subsidiary of the *Shorncliffe* complex.

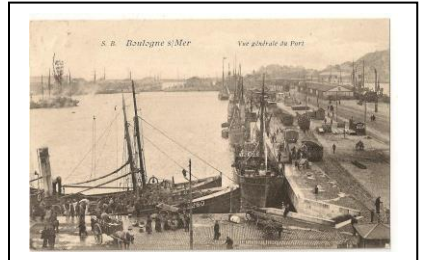
(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

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

There were now to pass a further three months of training in England with the 40th Reserve Battalion before a further transfer, on January 4 of the New Year, 1917, saw Private Routledge become a soldier of the newly-forming 26th (Reserve) Battalion. It and he were to spend but another four days at *Shorncliffe* before then being ordered to and sent to a second Canadian Military complex, that of *Camp Bramshott* in the southern – but not all that far-distant – county of Hampshire.

The call for Private Routledge finally came at *Bramshott* in early March on the fifth day of the month when he was *struck off strength* by the 26th Reserve Battalion, was transferred – at first on paper – to the Royal Canadian Regiment, before he was then *taken on strength* by that last-named unit.

Likely having passed through the English south-coast port-city of Southampton and then the French industrial city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine, on or about the night of March 7-8, 1917, Private Routledge reported to *duty* to the nearby *Rouelles Camp*, the main Canadian Base Depot in France on that March 8, one of thirty arrivals from England to do so on that day.



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

He was to remain posted at *Rouelles Camp* for the next eighteen days by which time it had been decided to temporarily send him to the 3rd Entrenching Battalion. He is recorded as having left the Base Depot on March 26, one of sixty-six men to be variously despatched on that date and as having arrived with the 3rd Entrenching Battalion some four days later, on the penultimate day of the month.

**These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks. They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However they also came to serve as reinforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.*



(Right above: *Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this also being a job to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned. – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

Pipe-laying, building and reparation of roads, and light-railway construction appear to have been Private Routledge's lot in life for the thirteen days that he was to be attached to the 3rd Entrenching Battalion. On April 12 he was to be one of four-hundred eighty men to be forwarded to various units; he apparently then having arrived with his new unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion, later on the same April 12.



(Right above: *A light-railway line in the throes of construction by Canadian troops somewhere in France – from Le Miroir*)

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The Royal Canadian Regiment, although having been the senior regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of the *Great War*, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas to the United Kingdom in October of 1914. In fact, it *had* been sent overseas, but in a different direction, to languish for a year on the British island possession of Bermuda.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector, where the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions served in the winter of 1915-1916, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive showing in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

After that posting, in the summer of 1915, the Royal Canadian Regiment had been brought home to Canada, there to take the same ship onward to the United Kingdom where it had there been attached to the 7th Infantry Brigade of the newly-forming 3rd Canadian Division.

The RCR* as part of the 7th Brigade had then been transferred to service with the fledgling 3rd Canadian Division** on the Continent on November 1 of 1915, before having been sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division and then, at the end of March of 1916, to the *Ypres Salient*.

**The RCR was – and still is today – a regiment, a force which may comprise any number of battalions: today, in 2017, there are three. Some British regiments, for example, however, eventually recruited as many as twenty or more battalions to serve at the Front during the Great War. Only a single battalion - normally one-thousand strong but during the Great War oft-times comprising a lesser number - of the Royal Canadian Regiment ever served at the front during the Great War.*

***The 3rd Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. Unlike the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions and, later, the 4th Canadian Division, it was not formed in the United Kingdom but, in an almost ad hoc fashion, of units already serving on the Continent at the time, and of others which were to arrive from England as late as February of 1916.*

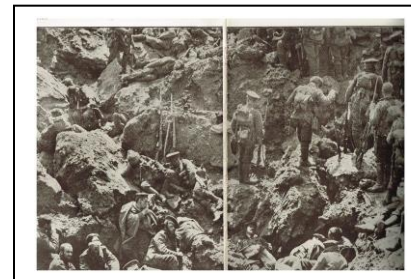
The first months of 1916 had been relatively peaceful for the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division in the frontier area. It was to be in March, 1916, that the entire Division had been transferred to the *Ypres Salient*, a lethal place at the best of times, to an area to the south-east of the city and in the vicinity of such places as the village of *Hooge*, and those that soon were to go by English names such as *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and *Mount Sorrel*.

However, in April it had been the 2nd Canadian Division, in a neighbouring sector to the south of Ypres, which was to receive the attention of the German Army for a few days. For the 2nd Division this period was not to be as tranquil as that being experienced elsewhere during the same time by the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 3rd Division.



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

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* was to officially taken place from March 27 up 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 there that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they had detonated on that March 27, having then followed up with an infantry assault.



After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle had been called off, both sides were to be back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

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

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2nd Canadian Division affair and the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the artillery duels some kilometres away.

Its *own* first major infantry action, some seven weeks later, was to be the confrontation with the Germans at *Mount Sorrel*, in the south-east area of the *Ypres Salient*.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Salient* remaining under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This had been just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, in the areas of the village of *Hooge* and those other places of English-sounding names as listed in a closely-previous paragraph. They are still referred to by the local people as such today.



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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to manage to patch up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly coordinated, had been a costly experience for the Canadians.



(Right above: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914*)

Ten days later the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost terrain for the most part had been recovered, both sides had returned to the positions in which they had been eleven days before – and the cemeteries, inevitably, were a little fuller.



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

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



(Right below: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres: The area today is protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014*)



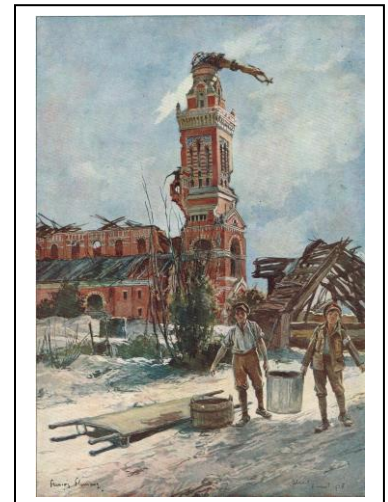
The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had been caught in the maelstrom of June 2 and had remained in the forward area until the night of June 5-6 when it had been relieved and had retired to Camp “B” well to the rear. The unit was not to serve again during the action at *Mount Sorrel* where it had, by the time of its retirement, incurred some one-hundred forty-five casualties.

Thus the RCR Battalion returned to the everyday routines of trench warfare for some two months, after which time the unit – as was to be the case of most of the other Canadian Battalions – had been once more withdrawn, in succession, on this occasion for special training in ‘*open warfare*’. The Canadians were about to travel south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

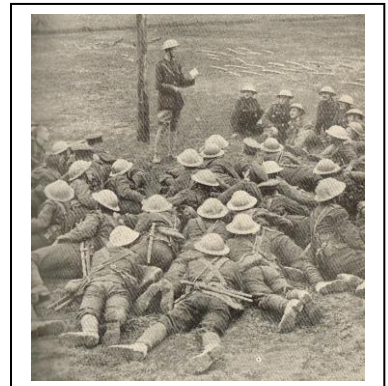
By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of just four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on July 1, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

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



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 on or about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



(continued)

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

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



The RCR had arrived in the area of the provincial town of Albert in the late evening of September 13 and just two days later, on September 15, had been ordered to move forward in order to attack a German strong-point, the *Zollern Graben*, on the following day. By four o'clock in the morning of September 17, when it withdrew, the RCR had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties and the *Zollern Graben* was still in German hands.



Three weeks later, another major action was to follow: the attack of October 8-9 on the *Regina Trench* system was not a success but, on the contrary, a further expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 10-11. By that latter time, however, the RCR was to be in the *Lens Sector*, some fifty kilometres to the north.

In fact, the unit was to be moving in that direction within days of having fought on October 8 at *Regina Trench*.

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



(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

During the five weeks of its sojourn at *the Somme* the Battalion had lost, *killed* and *wounded*, about four-hundred fifty *all ranks*. Over two-hundred more had been reported as *missing in action*, the War Diarist having optimistically predicted that most of them would be later found in field ambulances and casualty clearing stations. The accuracy of that forecast does not appear to have been documented.



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

(continued)

The RCR Battalion had begun to withdraw from *the Somme* on October 10. The Battalion War Diarist makes no mention of any motor transport or train having been employed so it may be assumed that the unit, as with many others, had retired from there on foot. The route had taken it westward at first, then had turned northward so as to pass to the west of the by-now shattered city of Arras and beyond.

(Right below: *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*)

It was on the 24th of that October of 1916 that the unit had arrived in the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector* to the north-west of Arras. The War Diarist on that date was to report the Battalion's strength as having been three-hundred eighty-six *all ranks*, less than forty per cent of regulation battalion numbers. *The Somme* had taken its toll.

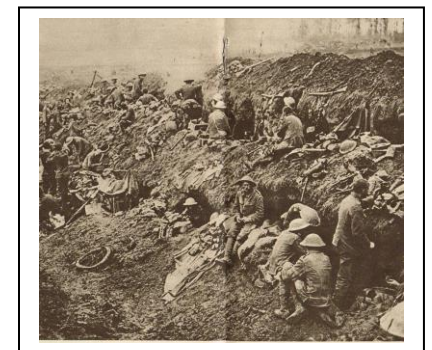


The RCR, in its new quarters in the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector*, once more had begun the daily pattern of life in and out of the trenches*, a routine which had then lasted until the middle of February of the following year, 1917.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers while off-duty perusing the program of an upcoming concert 'somewhere on the Continent' – from Le Miroir*)



**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*)

Thus the winter of 1916-1917 was to pass in that manner for the Royal Canadian Regiment. The Battalion War Diary is fairly repetitive in its entries: little in the way of infantry action except patrols and the occasional raid – by both sides. All activity was to be local and most casualties due to German artillery – some two-thirds of casualties on the *Western Front* were due to artillery action - and snipers.

(Right below: *A detachment of Canadian troops going up to the forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

Then in February the unit had been ordered into Divisional Reserve at Bruay where it had begun five weeks of training for the upcoming British offensive; not that it had been all work: the War Diary reports sports events and concerts among the litany of parades, lectures, marches, drills, work-parties and visits from military and political personages.



(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many duties of troops when in support or reserve – from Le Miroir*)

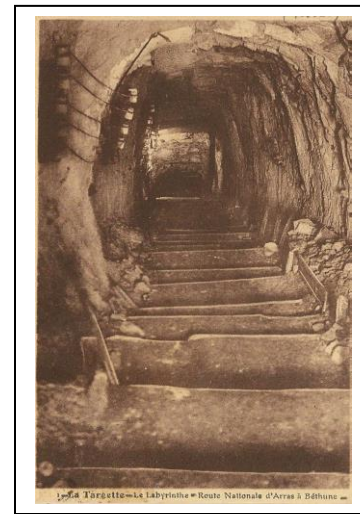
On March 21 the RCR had moved forward into the trenches once again; after five weeks in reserve perhaps the change was to be a bit of a shock to the Battalion's collective system: the War Diarist notes that the new quarters... *LA MOTTE Camp, is composed of Bivouacs, with nine tents for officers. We are its first occupants. It can be greatly improved.*



But he also enters that... *“C” Company relieved the right Company of the 58th Battn. taking over the exact frontage from which we are expected to jump off.* Such an observation illustrates the recent policy of informing junior officers and senior NCOs of the plans of intended actions, knowledge that these personnel were to pass down to the men under their command.

And it surely had been becoming clear to the men of the RCR that there were to be intended actions; the forward and rear areas in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector had been hives of ongoing activity for which the unit had supplied working-parties and carrying-parties each day: dumping-areas had been cleared, bivouacs had been sand-bagged, stone had been laid for walks, new trenches had been dug and old ones deepened, troops familiarized with the newly-excavated tunnels and other positions, water-pipes and communication lines buried, artillery and machine-guns sited...

(Right: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth – from a vintage post-card*)



On April 1 the RCR Battalion had retired to Villers-au-Bois for a week, there to organize for the first day of the offensive. On April 7, the first of the unit's Companies had moved into one of those tunnels which had been hewn out of the chalk; it was hoped that these galleries would reduce the number of casualties with the men sheltering there until the last possible moment, and that it would also nurture the element of surprise.

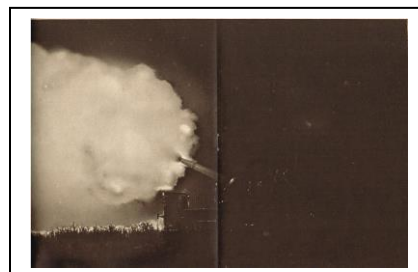


The men of the RCR were to remain underground for well over twenty-four hours.

(Preceding page: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017*)

As the days had passed, the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion had described it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans had 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 been very busy.

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



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.

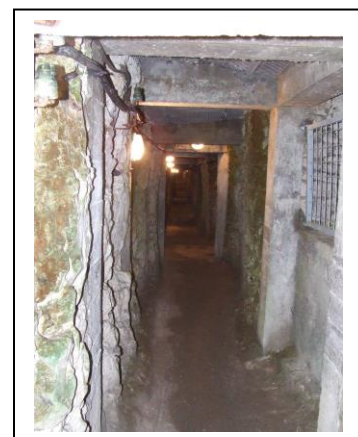


While the British campaign had proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

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

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

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



For no reason other than that it is one of the more legible entries to follow, an extract of the experience of “A” Company during the opening of the attack of April 9 is here included as being representative of the events of the assault undertaken by the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry of April 9, 1917) 3.12 a.m. “A” Company under Captain Munn reports Co. in Assembly trenches.

5.30 a.m. Raining. Barrage opens.

While the other three Companies were in communication with Headquarters at a relatively early hour, apparently not so "A" Company, not until... 1.40 p.m. Message from "A" Co. delivered by wounded runner stated that they had captured four machine guns, were in touch with Units on both flanks... and that they had sent a patrol over the Ridge.

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



2.15 p.m. "A" Co. (left Co.) is in its objective. Strength 1 Officer and approximately 50 other ranks with no N.C.O.'s. It is in touch with "C" Co (right) who's (sic) approximate strength is 1 Officer and sixty other ranks... "A" Co. has sent a patrol over the ridge from which as yet no report has been sent. There is a small gap between "A" Co. and the P.P.C.C.L.I. owing to the shortage of men. We command the whole situation at present, but unless reinforcements and supplies of every sort, more especially S.A.A. (small-arms ammunition) available, machine Guns, shovels etc., are sent up at first opportunity, it will be difficult to withstand another counter attack.

It was the 3rd Canadian Division – of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4th Canadian Division, whose objective had been Vimy Ridge itself, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions having had objectives on the right-hand side of the main slope*.

***This was the first occasion on which the four Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as an autonomous Canadian Army Corps rather than as a constituent of a British formation.**

In fact, on this occasion, a British Division was to operate under Canadian command although only a single brigade was employed – with the 2nd Canadian Division – on April 9.

Of the some ten thousand Canadian casualties of the day, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had incurred fifty-six killed in action, one-hundred sixty-five wounded, and sixty-five missing in action.

***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 – see above - 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.**

There had been no attempt to capitalize on the successes of April 9 as the orders had been not to advance, but to consolidate – and in fairness it should also be said that the state of the ground because of the weather and the relentless artillery fire had made it impossible to move supplies and guns forward – evacuating the wounded was another problem as an over-worked road and railway system found it difficult to respond to all demands.

Thus, by the time that Private Routledge had reported *to duty* with the RCR Battalion on April 12 of 1917, the euphoria of the first day – in fact the first hours – of the assault of *Vimy Ridge* had evaporated.

(Right: *The railway advances in the wake of the troops on Vimy Ridge and, as it is built, supplies are brought forward and the wounded are evacuated. – from Illustration*)



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The five-week *Battle of Arras* having sputtered to a halt in mid-May, the Royal Canadian Regiment was once again to face the grind of trench warfare. However, for many of the other units of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions which were serving in sectors from Vimy in the south to Béthune to the north this monotonous work was about to be spiced up: the Canadian Corps High Command had some offensive work planned.



(Right above: *The village of Souchez, just to the north of Vimy, already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir*)

The British High Command* had long since by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from *that* area, it had also ordered operations in the sectors of Canadian responsibility running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.

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

(Right: *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*)



**It should be remembered that during the Great War the British High Command was in control of not only its own troops but also those from all the British Dominions, colonies and territories.*

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

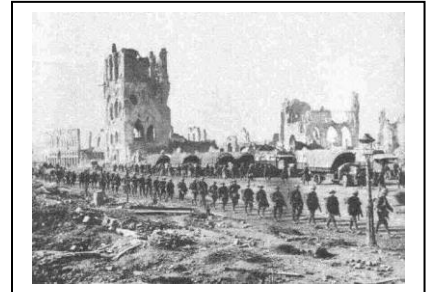
On August 15, a major attack had been launched by troops of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in the suburbs of the mining-centre and city of Lens and just to the north, at a small rise known as *Hill 70*. The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion, however, was not a part of this particular offensive and on that day was in fact busy in training at LaPugny.



As far as anything of military importance on that day was concerned, the Battalion War Diarist was sparing with his ink: *Nil*.

The Canadian efforts had apparently been planned to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium had been proceeding less well than anticipated and the High Command was by now beginning to look for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and New Zealanders, and then the Canadians had been ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadians were to be obliged to abandon their own plans.

It was to be just over seven weeks after the capture of *Hill 70*, on October 6, that Private Routledge's Royal Canadian Regiment had begun to make its way on foot and by train, to the area of the Franco-Belgian border. Later that day the unit had been billeted in the northern French town of Bailleul.



But it was not to be until October 23, having travelled in a circuitous route on foot and by train, that the RCR was to find itself in the war zone of the *Ypres Salient*.

(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*)

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign into which the Canadians were about to be thrust – already ongoing since the last day of that July of 1917 – was to come to be better known to history as *Passchendaele*, having usurped that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.



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

From the time that the Canadians had 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 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

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

(continued)

From October 23 until the end of the month the RCR had been in reserve in the area of Sin Jaan (*St-Jean*), having contributed to carrying-parties, working-parties and stretcher-parties. On October 30 it had been ordered forward and was to be involved peripherally in an attack by the 3rd Division.



The unit then had remained in the lines until having been relieved on November 4 – all of this at a cost of two-hundred fifty-eight casualties.

(Right above: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument. – photograph from 2010*)

It was not until November 14 that the Royal Canadian Regiment was to be back in the trenches intersecting what in peace-time had been the road leading north from Passchendaele (today *Passendale*) to the community of Westroosebeke*.



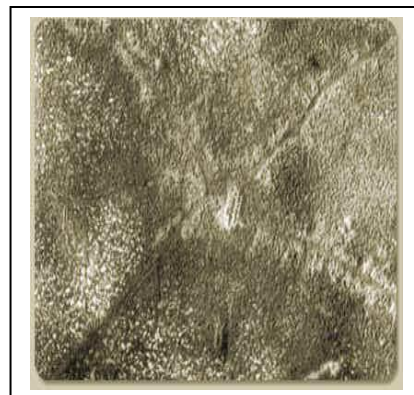
There it was to be almost continually shelled for three days, having incurred fifty casualties before then having been withdrawn from its positions – and indeed from the 3rd *Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele* – on the morning of November 18.

**The Battalion's positions were also atop the Passchendaele Ridge.*

(Right above: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

Two days later again, on November 20, the unit had been back in northern France, at Rely, a community some eighteen kilometres to the west of Béthune. There it was to remain, both resting and training, for a month, until December 21 when it had been bussed back to the *Lens Sector*.



That daily grind of life in the trenches was now to begin once more.

But by this time, Private Routledge had played his role to its end.

Reported as occurring on November 19 – although perhaps as early as the day before – Private Routledge had incurred a wound: either a bullet or a shard of shrapnel had penetrated his abdomen. He was evacuated from the field and after preliminary treatment had been evacuated the fifteen or so kilometres to the 44th Casualty Clearing Station in the north-west periphery of the town of Poperinghe.

(continued)

The son of Harry Routledge (also *Rutledge*), former crane-operator and fireman*, and of Bertha Routledge, (née *Murrin* and deceased by the time of her son's enlistment), of St. John's, Newfoundland, before Whitney Pier, Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia**, he was also brother to William, Peter and to Angus – his address: Esplanade Street, Sydney.



**Tending the fire to produce steam*

***Harry Routledge survived the Great War and went to reside with his mother, Margaret, in the United States of America, at 292, St. George Avenue, in Newark, New Jersey.*

(Right above: *The photograph of Private Robert Routledge of the 16th Platoon, 106th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the [www.angelfire](http://www.angelfire.com) web-site - A short history and photographic record 106th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., Nova Scotia Rifles.)*

Private Routledge was reported by the officer commanding the 44th Casualty Clearing Station as having *died of wounds* on Monday, November 19, 1917.

Robert Routledge had enlisted at the *apparent* age of seventeen years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, August 1, 1897 (from attestation papers)*.

**While the Commonwealth War Graves Commission indicates that he died at the age of sixteen, there nowhere appears to be any further evidence among either his or his father's files for this.*

Private Robert Routledge 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 24, 2023.



