



**Driver William Thomas Russell\* (Number 44031) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train, Canadian Army Service Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Écoivres Military Cemetery, Mont St-Éloi: Grave reference VI.L.9..**

***\*William Thomas King (see further below) served as William Thomas Russell.***



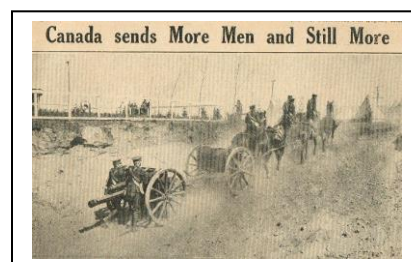
**(Right above: *The image of the formation patch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)**

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *shoemaker*, William Thomas Russell appears to have left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Canada prior to the *Great War*. On his attestation papers he records having been in the Newfoundland Reserve (Naval?), but there seems to be no evidence elsewhere to confirm this; nor do there appear to be any records of his emigration to Canada.

However, he must have crossed to the mainland at some time before the Great War, and then made his way to Valcartier, Québec, by the late summer of 1914, as that was where he eventually both enlisted and attested.

His first Army medical records dated September 10, 1914 - which recorded him as...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*... - show that William Thomas Russell presented himself for enlistment on that same day whereupon he was *taken on strength* at Valcartier by the Divisional Ammunition Column\*. Two weeks later, on September 24, Gunner Russell was then attested.

*\*At the time there was only a single Canadian Division. However, as the Great War progressed, there were eventually to be five of them; thus logically they were numbered, the original Canadian Division to become the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division and the Divisional Ammunition Column also adding a '1<sup>st</sup>' to its designation.*



(Right above: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – photograph (from a later date in the war) from *The War Illustrated*)*

The formalities of Gunner\* Russell's enlistment were not to be brought to an official conclusion until more than two months later when, on December 4, 1914, the commanding officer of the Divisional Ammunition Column, Lieutenant-Colonel John Jenkin Penhale, declared – on paper – that...*W. Russell...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

*\*\*His records bear the rank of Gunner, this being later amended to Driver upon his transfer to the Divisional Train.*

By that December 4 of 1914, a great deal of water had passed under the metaphoric bridge.

Some of the thirty officers and five-hundred sixty-one *other ranks* of the Divisional Ammunition Column had boarded His Majesty's Transports *Megantic*\* and the others on *Montezuma* at Québec on September 30.

Gunner Russell's detachment on *Megantic* was to take passage with the Number 1 Canadian Field Ambulance as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Casualty Clearing Station – both of which had embarked on September 25\* - and also in the company of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry whose date of boarding is not clear.

(Right below: *The image of Megantic is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

On that September 30, *Megantic* is recorded as having sailed from Québec. If so, she, like other vessels, would have moved downstream by easy stages until on October 3 she was to rendezvous in the Gaspé with the other vessels and the five naval escorts of the convoy which was to carry the *Canadian Expeditionary Force* overseas.

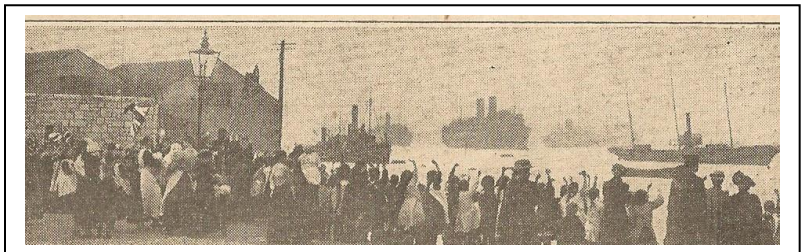


In the meantime the Number 1 Canadian Field Ambulance was undertaking the necessary vaccinations and other medical services on board ship.

From the Gaspé the thirty-one transports and their naval escorts sailed on October 3 of that 1914. On October 5, as the formation passed along the south coast of Newfoundland, the small Bowring Brothers' steamer *Florizel* sailed to meet and join it. She was carrying the *First Five-Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment to war.

Following a smooth – from all points of view – crossing of the Atlantic, the convoy entered the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport during the afternoon of October 14\*.

Many of the arriving units, however, were obliged to remain on ship for days before their debarkation could be effected.



*\*The original destination had been the much larger port-city of Southampton, but a submarine scare had forced a change in plans.*

(Right above: *A number of the ships of the convoy which had carried the Canadian Expeditionary Force to England, at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914 – from The War Illustrated*)

It was to be October 16 before the sixteen officers and four-hundred forty-three\* *other ranks* of the Divisional Ammunition Column disembarked from *Megantic*, commencing at two o'clock in the afternoon and completing the exercise four hours later. From the port, Gunner Russell's unit then marched to Mill Bay railway station, there at ten o'clock that evening to take a train to the large British military establishment on the Salisbury Plain.

*\*The unit's nominal roll numbers twenty-four officers and some five-hundred seventy-five other ranks. Logically, those not on Megantic travelled on Montezuma, approximate one hundred-forty all ranks – plus the unit's horses (see below).*

Patney Station was reached some five hours later at twenty minutes past three in the morning. From there the unit – less fifty of the personnel who were by then suffering from food poisoning - was then to march a distance of eight miles (some thirteen kilometres) to the camp at *West Down North*, where tents had been pitched to await the Column's arrival.

The following days were to be spent organizing the unit's camp and in particular preparing for the arrival of the horses which had crossed the ocean with their handlers on *Montezuma*. Even though the Army was becoming mechanized, by far the greater part of the transport was still provided by *natural* horse-power.

However, when *Montezuma* had disembarked her equine charges, it was discovered that there had been some mismanagement: horses of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been placed on board instead of those of the Column. The number of extra horses had consequently meant there was to be no space for the Column's wagons which had thereupon been left behind at Québec\*.

*\*Nor were all horses alike. If those of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion were the officers' riding horses then they would likely have been useless to the Divisional Ammunition Column whose need was for draught animals.*

By the end of the month things were returning to normal: the number of horses had risen to almost the establishment strength of seven-hundred nine; the unit's forge – and therefore its blacksmiths - was working; more than eighty per cent of the missing wagons had either been found or replaced; unit personnel was only some fifty off full strength; an inspection had been held and the horse-grooming found to be wanting; and it was raining.



(Right above: *The personnel of a Royal Horse Artillery forge and blacksmith's shop just prior to the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The British Army – and thus Canadian Army - regulations of the day were such that troops were to undergo some fourteen weeks of training after the time of enlistment; at that point they were to be considered as fit for *active service*. Thus the newly-arrived Canadians of the infantry battalions were to spend the remainder of October and up until the first week of February, 1915, in becoming proper *Soldiers of the King* – even if they were *colonials*\*.

*\*Colonials they may have been, but at this early stage of the Great War, some eighty percent of Canadian Army personnel had been born in the British Isles.*

The personnel of the Divisional Ammunition Column, however, while necessarily undertaking certain training exercises common to all units, physical exercises and route marches for example, were also engaged in those perhaps more pertinent to their particular service: Gunner Russell and his horses were to undergo specialized training to hook in and harness at speed and under duress.

The months of that late autumn and of the following winter were to be just as hectic in other ways: There were to be visits from politicians and generals – and one even from the King and Queen, with the requisite preparations for such an occasion.

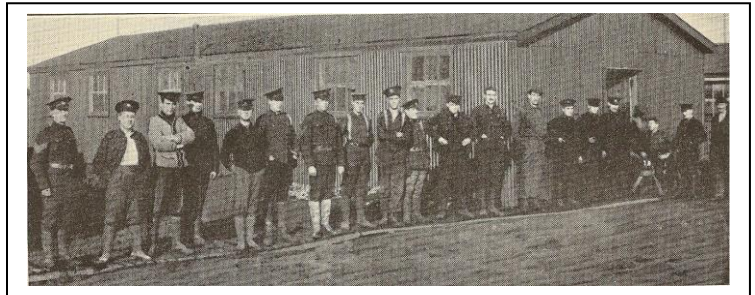
More supplies and more horses arrived...as did the rains followed by snow, by which time some of the drill which had been absent during those first days and weeks had found its way into the busy schedule of Gunner Russell's unit.

He also found time to fall ill and to be admitted, on November 24, into the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian General Hospital established at the time in the vicinity of the nearby community of Bulford. There Gunner Russell was diagnosed as suffering from both pneumonia and pleurisy and was to remain there receiving medical attention until December 29 when he was discharged *to duty*.

Just over a month later, on February 1 of 1915, Gunner Russell was allotted a further responsibility when he was appointed – with a daily fifty-cent raise in pay\* – to the post of saddler.

*\*A gunner earned one dollar per diem and also drew a daily Field Allowance of ten cents.*

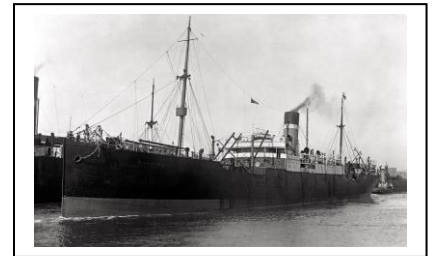
On February 4, 1915, the Canadian Division marched to a review area where it was inspected by His Majesty, King George V and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener\*. The Canadians were about to be sent overseas, across the English Channel, to *active service* on the Western Front.



*\*For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener, Ontario, was named in 1916 – it had been known as Berlin until that time.*

(Right above: *Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire – from The War Illustrated*)

By the time of that final royal review – in which it did not participate - the Divisional Ammunition Column was stationed at Tidworth where it had spent the first week of February gathering and organizing for its imminent transfer to the continent. There were to be eight trains for men, animals and vehicles to be readied for departure on February 8 and to be sent on their way to the docks at Avonmouth, Bristol.



All went as had been planned and the trains were even sent *ahead* of schedule.

(Right above: *The photograph of the ship City of Benares is from the Shipspotting.com web-site.*)

On the next day, February 9, upon arrival at dockside, the personnel of the DAC boarded the HMT *City of Benares* and HMT *Rossetti* – Gunner Russell on this latter vessel - for the crossing of the English Channel to France. The vessels sailed at or about mid-night.



(Right: *The photograph of Rossetti is from the Scottish Built Ships web-site.*)

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The *City of Benares* dropped anchor in the St-Nazaire roads late in the afternoon of February 11 although its passengers were not to disembark until the following morning, February 12. After they had landed, the troops were to spend much of the remainder of the day in unloading the vessel as the local dockers and stevedores appeared to be on strike. The task was accomplished by mid-night\*.

*\*The DAC's War Diarist obviously travelled to France on board the City of Benares since of Rossetti there is no mention. One must assume that the two ships shared the same sort of inconsequential experiences since nothing to the contrary has been recorded.*

On the morrow, Saturday, February 13, four trains had been scheduled to transport the DAC to the north of the country. It was not until half-past seven in the evening that the first train began its journey, the remaining three then leaving at intervals of three hours.

Their destination was the town of Hazebrouck to which to travel from St-Nazaire is a journey of some seven-hundred kilometres. The first train carrying the DAC arrived at its destination some twenty-seven hours later, at ten-thirty in the evening of February 15, having thus galloped along at an average of some twenty-six kilometres per hour\*.

Just how far it was from the station to the billets of both men and horses is not clear from the diary, but it was eventually a quarter past six in the morning before anyone slept.

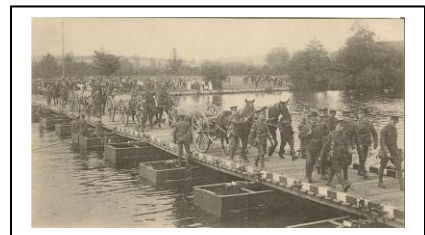
(Right: *The northern French town of Hazebrouck, the photograph likely taken between the Wars – from a vintage post-card*)



There appears to be no report in the DAC War Diary concerning the arrival of any of the subsequent trains. One may only presume that the War Diarist was not there to greet them at the station.

*\*Compared to the experiences of other troops, this was fast.*

From the time of its arrival in mid-February until mid-April, the Canadian Division was stationed in the *Fleurbaix Sector* – the Ordnance Depot at Cæstre - to the south and west of the northern French town of Armentières. This was also just southward of the Franco-Belgian frontier which the formation would cross two months hence.



(Right above: *Troops on the march, here crossing a pontoon bridge, in the north of France: This is surely from the early period of the Great War as there is not a single steel helmet in sight. – from a vintage post-card*)

While he was at Cæstre, Gunner Russell on February 27 apparently saw fit to disobey his orders. The penalty for the offence was heavy, possibly exacerbated by his being on *active service*: he was sentenced to five days of Field Punishment Number 2 to which was added the forfeiture of five days' pay.

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During that same initial period of service on the Continent, the Divisional Ammunition Column was gradually becoming organized. The unit's prime task – having collected the various units' needs from the principal dump, the Ammunition Park - was to deliver them to the three infantry brigades of the Division and also to its artillery.

This having been accomplished, the infantry brigades were then responsible for accommodating the needs of their own infantry battalions, and the artillery brigades those of their own batteries.

The quantities of ammunition required were already prodigious: by the end of the war they were to have become astronomical. On March 4, a routine day, the DAC issued to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Ammunition Column, four-hundred quick-firing shrapnel shells (altogether just under over five tons weight) and three-hundred thousand rounds of .303 small-arms ammunition for rifles and machine-guns.

On March 5, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade received one-hundred fifty-two Q-F shrapnel shells and one-hundred forty-five thousand of .303 ammunition. Meanwhile, on that same day, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade required one-hundred thousand rounds of .303, and there were also seventy-five thousand rounds of .45 Colt automatic ammunition to distribute.

Even with these numbers having been delivered, the Divisional Ammunition Column was still able to report ...*We have on hand 862,000 .303 ball...5507 18 pr shrapnel...*

*(Right: A British eighteen-pounder quick-firing artillery piece, the mainstay of the British and Empire (Commonwealth) artillery forces during the Great War, here seen at the Imperial War Museum, London – photograph from 2011(?))*



After two-month's service in the *Fleurbaix Sector* the Canadian Division was ordered north into Belgium, and into the north-eastern sector of the *Ypres Salient\**. On April 7, 1915, the Divisional Ammunition Column began to make the transfer\*\*.

*\*As it approached the remnants and rubble of Ypres, the front line became a bulge which encircled the entire eastern area of the medieval city and its outskirts. This bulge was the Ypres Salient – or just 'the Salient'. Already having earned a reputation as a dangerous place, it was to become one of the most lethal theatres of the entire Western Front.*

*\*\*Of course, it was to be the infantry that was posted to the Salient, the support troops being well behind the lines and further to the west. The Divisional Ammunition Column, while much of its work would be on Belgian soil, was at first to be based near the French town of Steenvoorde and its head-quarters established on the French side of the Franco-Belgian frontier.*

Gunner Russell's Divisional Ammunition Column began to move toward Steenvoorde on April 7 and had settled into its new surroundings – according to the Canadian Division's War Diary – by the following day.

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This appears to be correct, except to say that the first area to which it had been directed – this according to the *Column's War Diary* - ...*proved to be quite unsuitable*. By the morrow, apparently, further arrangements had been made and all was well.

It would appear that the priority for the next few days was to provide the Canadian troops newly-arriving in *the Salient* with ammunition, not only for immediate use but also to create a reserve stock... *This is necessary as the trenches are being taken over from French troops which do not of course use the .303 ammunition and so there would be no ammunition in the trenches or in rear...to start with...* (Excerpt from DAC War Diary entry for April 14, 1915).

On April 16 alone, to this end, one million, three-hundred sixty thousand rounds of .303 ammunition were despatched by the DAC to the various units requesting them.

Days later, following a general move forward towards Ypres by all the Canadian forces, the DAC forsook its billets in the area of Steenvoorde, traversed the frontier, and took up quarters to the north-east of the town of Poperinghe.

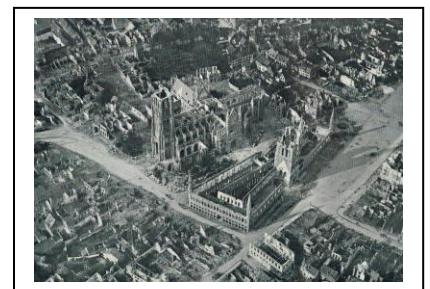
The date was April 20, 1915; two days later, on April 22, the Germans struck.

Up until that time, during what were in fact only a few days of Canadian tenure, the *Ypres Salient* had proved to be a relatively quiet posting. Then in the late afternoon of that April 22, the dam broke - although it was to be gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it.

(Right: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The *2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by anyone during the *Great War*. It was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.



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

The cloud was at first noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered.

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Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, became necessary while, at the same time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade of the Canadian Division were moved forward to support the French and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade.

(Right: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)



By the second day of the attack, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan had been held until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement became necessary.

At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.



(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after several Canadian battalions occupied its west bank– to the left – at the end of April, 1915 - photograph from 2014*)

(Right below: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack at Ypres (today Ieper). – photograph from 2010*)

As for the Divisional Ammunition Column, on the evening of that April 22...An order came in at 8.10 pm from Canadian Divisional Artillery Headquarters to “send up lots of ammunition”. At 8.40 pm 2800 18-pr Shrapnel, 200 Lyddite 4.5 How (howitzer), and 600 000 of .303 ball were on the road to the refilling point. The supply was kept in circulation during the whole night. The Canadian Ammunition Park...kept us well filled up. All our horses, wagons and personnel were kept going during the night... (Excerpt from DAC War Diary entry for April 22, 1915)



Almost seven-thousand shells and well over a millions rounds of .303 small-arms ammunition were distributed during the first twenty-four hours of the battle.

The second twenty-four hours was almost as busy according once more to the DAC War Diary entry of April 24: three-thousand two-hundred shells in total and a further eight-hundred forty-five thousand .303 rounds were supplied. It was to continue thus until, in fact, some units were reporting an over-supply of ammunition.

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By Sunday, April 25, as might be expected after some seventy-two hours of battle, not only the personnel but also the horses were becoming more than a little jaded, to the point that concern was being expressed for the animals' condition. Indeed, certain units were beginning to report that some horses were no longer capable of performing.

(Right below: *Innocent victims of the conflict: an artist's portrayal of dead horses in the Grande Place (Grand'Place) at Ypres during the battle of the spring of 1915 – from Illustration*)

Fortunately, the situation was by this time stabilizing and the demands on the supply trains and columns were becoming less heavy. Not only that, but replacement horses were being received from some of the cavalry units which were unable to undertake any of the fighting in the trenches\*.



*\*The cavalry was to be of little use from the late autumn of 1914 until the summer of 1918 when the war once again was to become one of movement. In fact, the Canadian Mounted Rifle Regiments were soon to lose all their horses and, officially at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916, to become regular infantry battalions.*



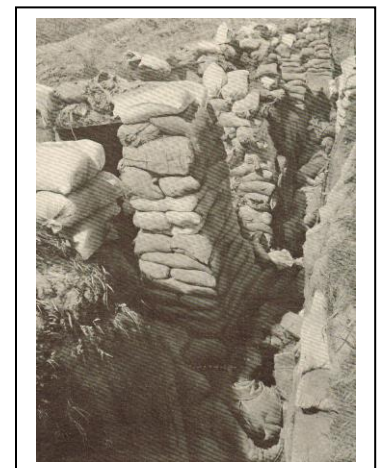
(Right above: *From a later period of the Great War, Canadian cavalry patrolling an area behind the lines – from Illustration*)

By Friday April 30, the DAC was supplying fewer than one-hundred thousand rounds per day of the .303 ammunition and fewer shells than on the days preceding. And although the fighting was to continue, the Canadians were to be less and less implicated and the infantry battalions were withdrawn westward into northern France. There they were to rest, to re-organize and to re-enforce before then being re-called to fight another battle.

As for Gunner Russell's Divisional Ammunition Column, it was now to be re-billeted on May 7, in the border area to the south of Ypres. A week later it was ordered to move once more, on this occasion to the vicinity of the community of St-Venant and across the frontier into France.

Gunner Russell's unit was now about to play its role at the confrontations at Festubert and at Givenchy.

It was only about two weeks after the Canadians had retired from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres that they were next ordered to join British and Indian forces in northern France, to that part of the *Western Front* which was to be found in the areas of the communities of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support, a limited offensive to divert German attention and troops from the French effort.

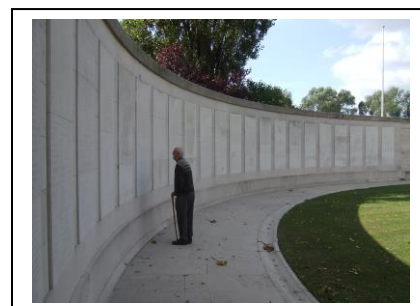


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**(Preceding page: *Captured German positions in the French-occupied area just down the line from Festubert and Givenchy: The trenches are still primitive compared to the complex labyrinths which they would soon become. – from Illustration*)**

**There at Festubert, a series of attacks and counter-attacks was to take place in which the British High Command would manage to gain some three kilometres of ground but was also to contrive to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not having the same numbers of troops to put in the field – would happily not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered heavily\*.**

***\*The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7<sup>th</sup> (Meerut) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert – had proportionately hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.***

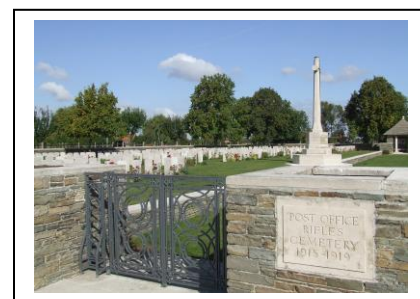


**The French effort – using the same tactics - had likewise been a failure but on an even larger scale; it had cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.**

***\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.***

**(Right above: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell; he is pictured at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)**

**On and about the final day of May the Canadian units which had fought at Festubert had been ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*, a small village not far distant to the south of Festubert. Despatched into the forward trenches in the middle of the month of June to support British efforts, the Canadians were to incur the same sort of results, although fewer in number – fourteen killed, seventy-nine wounded - from having repeated some of the same errors as at Festubert.**



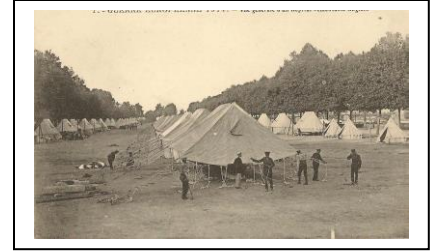
***\*Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.***

**(Right above: *The Post Office Rifles Cemetery at Festubert wherein lie some four-hundred dead, only one-third of them identified. – photograph from 2010*)**

**Whether Gunner Russell played a role at Festubert and Givenchy is not sure, particularly in the case of the latter action. Some rather incomplete files suggest that he was sick or perhaps even wounded during the first half of the month of June, 1915.**

**(continued)**

He is firstly recorded as having been discharged back to duty on June 6 from the 4<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Lillers although there is nothing which records the reason for him having been admitted there in the first place. Then, five days later, on June 11, the commanding officer of the DAC reported that he had been sent to hospital for an undocumented problem.



The complaint had likely been a minor one as he re-joined his unit once more only five days afterwards. As recorded above, there was no recorded diagnosis, but upon his return to the unit it appears that Gunner Russell was thereupon placed on strict rations – whatever that might imply.

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

On June 17 the Canadian Division had begun to retire from the entire area of northern France, to move back into Belgium\*. Once there it had taken over responsibility for the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just on the Belgian side of the frontier.

*\*The (by now) 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column must have been one of the few exceptions to this rule as it remained based south of the frontier.*

In the next months it was to become well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

*(Right: 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)*



The Canadian Division was to remain in that border area of West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services would be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.

Meanwhile, it was not to be until the night of June 26-27, 1915, that the DAC was to leave its quarters and positions in proximity to the town of Béthune and to move into new billets to the south-east of Bailleul.

Logically it was one of the last of the Canadian units to leave the sector as unexpended ammunition was to be returned to it: there was a shortage of shells at this period of the *Great War* and the ones available were not always very good. Those that had been distributed had been strictly rationed.



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(Preceding page: *The re-built town of Bailleul almost a century after the visit by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade: Much of the damage to be done to it was the result of the later fighting in the spring of 1918. – photograph from 2010.*)

The billets at Bailleul had been inherited from the 48<sup>th</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column, an Imperial (*British*) unit and...*were found to be in an unsanitary condition by our Medical Officer.* However, most problems had subsequently been put right – by nine o'clock the next morning. The only thing to lack apparently was enough water for the horses, and the only criticism offered by General Alderson, Commander-in-Chief of the (by-now) 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division who inspected on June 30, was that some men were badly shaved and some horses were badly shod.

The general appears to have made no mention of the unit's saddlery so it was not for that reason that on July 8 Gunner Russell...*Ceased to draw working pay as saddler.* No other reason is offered in his dossier.

Some two months later, on September 1, 1915, Gunner Russell was transferred from the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Ammunition Column to the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train of the Canadian Army Service Corps. Having been *struck off strength* by the former, he was then *taken on strength* by the latter on the next day, September 2. His pay records seem not to have been able to keep pace with the speed of events as it was not until the end of October that the Divisional Train is recorded as having taken responsibility for his remuneration\*.

*\*He was, of course, still paid in the interim.*

\* \* \* \* \*

At the time of Gunner Russell's transfer to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train – there to become *Driver Russel* – this unit was based in the vicinity of the small Belgian community of DeBroeken in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier.

The first months of the war-time history of the Divisional Train was much in tandem with the other units of the Canadian Division. It had trained at the Valcartier military complex before its personnel boarded three ships at Québec – *Alaunia*, *Virginian* and *Montreal* – on or about September 27, 1914. These ships were eventually to be elements of the convoy which then sailed from the Gaspé to arrive in Plymouth-Devonport on October 14.



(Right above: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it now was almost a century after the Great War – and a lot less busy than in those far-off times - photograph from 2013*)

From there the Divisional Train had moved to the *West Down North Camp* on the Salisbury Plain which was the British Army's large training area. Unfortunately, the unit's War Diarist has begun to record proceedings only as of November 9, painting a picture of confusion and inefficiency – at least at the outset.

(continued)

Apparently the Divisional Train was not to flaunt its expertise in front of the King and Lord Kitchener in early February of 1915 as had the majority of the Canadian Forces, since, as had been the case of Gunner Russell's DAC, it was busy preparing for the Division's transfer to the Continent.



(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – from Wikipedia)

The Train's departure from Salisbury Plain took place over a three-day period comprising the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of the month. Some of the personnel then travelled by sea on one of the same ships as had Gunner Russell's DAC, the *City of Benares*, and the entire unit had arrived in the French port of St-Nazaire on February 11-12. From there, again as had Gunner Russell, it left there by train and travelled northwards to Hazebrouck, thus to finish its journey in much the same area of northern France as had he.

By March 2, the unit had been head-quartered in - and in the vicinity of - the village of Sailly, to be found in the rear area of the *Fleurbaix Sector* for which the Canadian Division now had responsibility. There it remained for the next three weeks until March 25 when the entire Train was posted a short distance away, to the north of Estaires and then to nearby Neuf-Berquin.

By early April the Canadian Division was preparing to move from northern France into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, there to take responsibility from the French for a part of the front in the *Ypres Salient*. As a precursor to that transfer, the Divisional Train now moved into the area of Steenvoorde, a larger community in northern France just to the west of the frontier where it bends north towards the Belgian ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge.

In fact, it was to be Steenvoorde through which much of the Canadian Division was to pass on its way to *the Salient* during that April of 1915 and, as has already been seen, it was where Gunner Russell's Divisional Ammunition Column was to station its headquarters, before the advance of the Division towards its new positions at Ypres necessitated the Column's advance into Belgium.



(Right above: *A convoy of ammunition on its way to providing shells to artillery units: This is likely at the Somme during the summer of 1916.* – from *Le Miroir*)

*But what was the 'raison d'être' of a Divisional Train? This unit – which had nothing whatever to do with a railway train - in combination with the Divisional Ammunition Column, was in fact the life-line of a Division on active service in the field.*

*Normally, in Commonwealth and British Forces of the Great War, a Divisional Train comprised a Headquarters Company and four Horse-Transport Companies. Three of these Companies each carried the baggage and supplies of an Infantry Brigade – of which there were three per Division – and of a single Field Ambulance of which there were also three; the fourth Horse-Drawn Company was responsible for the baggage and supplies of the Divisional personnel, including the Headquarters staff.*

***Supplies arrived by ship in the various ports and were forwarded in bulk to an Army Depot; there the supplies were divided into railway-train loads, each carrying enough for a single Division for a single day. These trains went towards into the area of the Division in question as far as did the railway itself – the tracks often laid expressly for that purpose.***

***The supplies were then unloaded, having been met at the railhead\* by the horse-drawn wagons of the Divisional Train whose responsibility they now were, and which then proceeded to carry them to the Brigades and to the Field Ambulances of the Division.***

***\*These subordinate depots are referred to as ‘refilling points’ in the unit’s War Diary.***

**On April 17-18 the Divisional Train settled into quarters near Brielen, to the west and north-west of Ypres, although apparently some of the only *quarters* available to some personnel were their wagons under which they had to sleep. Nor was the area easily accessible to either motor vehicles or even bicycles – *I hope Headquarters will not want us in a hurry...*wrote the Commanding Officer in his unit’s War Diary. Even after two months spent *in the field*, there was still much to be learned.**

**As has been seen in earlier pages, the Germans attacked the *Ypres Salient* at a point held by French Colonial troops and then the Canadian positions adjacent to it in the late afternoon of April 22, 1915. The War’s first use of chlorine gas as an offensive weapon followed by an infantry assault almost caused the collapse of the north-eastern defences during days of intense fighting; and although those defences held, and even though the situation had stabilized towards the end of the month, on April 29, the Commanding Officer of the Divisional Train confided to the pages of the unit’s War Diary that...*Hunted for a road to take the Divisional Train around Poperinghe in case of a retirement as Poperinghe has been shelled every day.***



PERDANT L'ARTON, DANS LE SÉCTEUR YPPRES  
C'est dans une tranchée, au moment où les Allemands lançaient leur gaz, que l'artilleur britannique fut tué par un obus allemand.  
Photo prise par The Illustrated London News – 1915/1916

**(Right: *Troops, these British, in hastily-dug trenches at Ypres. It was to be 1916 before any of the belligerent armies equipped its troops with steel helmets. – from Illustration*)**

**He eventually found such a road, but was never called upon to use it.**

**During those days following the attack of April 22, the unit had been withdrawn some short distance which had rendered its operations more difficult: the distance to the forward area was now greater thus adding time spent exposed to the perils posed by the fighting; some artillery units were unable to collect their supplies, thus the Train personnel endeavoured to deliver it closer; and the empty wagons were then necessary for the evacuation of wounded to the medical centres, these not necessarily close to the Train’s refilling station. It was a busy time.**

**Excerpt from Divisional Train War Diary of April 23, 1915: *All have been cautioned not to take unnecessary risks, but the rations must go up. Lulls in the firing must be taken advantage of and different roads taken if necessary. Bomb dropped near Train from German aeroplane.***

The work continued without respite day and night. Also in the Commanding Officer's entry of April 29, he reported that that was the first day on which he had had a change of clothes and under-clothes since the beginning of the crisis.

There were, of course, casualties incurred by the Divisional Train during this period, among both the humans and the draught and pack animals serving. One of the least pleasant tasks for the personnel was the collection and disposal of the carcasses of the horses and mules which were often victims during the fighting.

From May 6 to 14 the Divisional Train was again preparing to make a move, on this occasion to support the efforts of the Canadian Division in the engagements at Festubert and Givenchy as recounted on an earlier page.

Even so, it was expected to supply those units which were still serving in Belgium – an effort which placed a great strain on both men, animals and equipment: *The Canadian Divisional Train is now feeding and transporting troops in the general area bounded by YPRES – POPERINGHE – LOCON – BUSNES in about 200 square miles.* (Excerpt from Canadian Divisional Train War Diary entry of May 18, 1915)

Eventually the unit Headquarters were established in or near the community of Oblinghem, to the north-east of the larger centre of Béthune. From there it was to direct the operations of the Divisional Train for the period of May 20 to June 27, by which time most of the Canadian troops which had served at Festubert and Givenchy – and had not become casualties – had either withdrawn into the *Ploegsteert Sector* in southern Belgium or were in the process of doing so.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train followed and, after eighteen days spent in the border area at La Crêche, by the middle of the month of July it had taken over an area in proximity to nearby DeBroeken on the Belgian side of the frontier.



Some seven weeks later, at the beginning of that September, it was at DeBroeken that Driver Russel had reported to duty with his new unit and was attached to the Train's 1<sup>st</sup> Company.

(Right above: *One hundred years later, this is the hamlet of La Crêche just to the south of the main Bailleul to Nieppe road and also of the Franco-Belgian frontier.* – photograph from 2010)

\* \* \* \* \*

There was now to follow a period, from July of 1915, to the end of March, 1916, of about eight to nine months of relative calm. With the arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division in September of 1915 and the *official* formation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division at mid-night of December 31 of 1915 and January 1 of 1916, the Canadians were beginning to take responsibility for more and more of the Belgian sectors.

(continued)



For those months, Army life became a succession of routines: the infantry rotated between postings to the rear, support and front positions; the other units – artillery, service, medical - remained much *in situ*; routines would have become the order of Driver Russell's day.

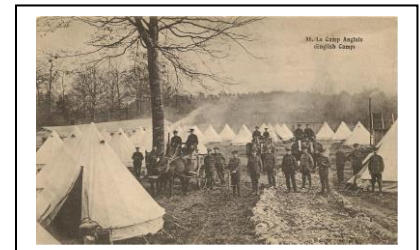


(Right: *Among the foliage a British heavy artillery piece hides from enemy observers.* – from a vintage 1915 post-card)

The 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train War Diary entry for September 20, 1915, allows a glimpse of the running of the unit as seen from its Commanding Officer's point of view, preceded, as ever, by a synopsis of the weather:

*Fine Day. Inspected the books and Conduct Sheets of No.4 Company and found them in good shape. I will inspect them again next week so as to get them as perfect as possible. We have now three refilling points DEBROEKEN - LOCRE – LA MENEGATE and we are at present split up into five groups. (1) The Supply Sections of the 1<sup>st</sup> C.D.T. at DEBROEKEN feeding the bulk of the Division (2) The Supply Section of the Train with a few Supply Details and a Baggage Section of the Train that looks after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bde C.F.A., are at LA MENEGATE (3) Supply Details of No 4 Coy C.D.T. which look after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Bde. at LOCRE (4) Ten Baggage Wagons at Nieppe helping the Engineers (5) The Baggage Sections of the 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Bde at HAEGREDROONE 1000 yds N. of Bailleul. I inspected refilling points at LOCRE and found everything satisfactory... I then went to KEMMEL to see the G.O.C. 3<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bde who said everything was satisfactory. This town is considerably battered and houses fortified with sandbags. In coming into the town we passed behind a screen of canvas to keep the road from view of the enemy's trenches.*

The autumn of 1915 and the subsequent winter passed peaceably – relative to war-time – and the problems arising were for the most part not attributable to any action of the part of the enemy who, for the most part – as did the Canadians – restricted their activities to sniping, patrolling, the occasional minor raid and the even less-frequent major one, and of course the omnipresent artillery – to which most historians attribute some sixty to seventy per cent of the casualties of the *Great War*.



(Right above: *A British camp 'somewhere on the Continent' during a winter period with troops gathered with three General-Service Wagons* – from a vintage post-card)

Driver Russell had been able to at least temporarily escape the grind of war-service for an eight-day period when he was granted leave as of February 2 of 1916. Unfortunately his dossier provides no further information as to where these days were spent or the attractions of which he availed. It is documented only that he returned to duty with his unit on the date on which he was due, February 10.

(continued)

However, hardly had he time to draw breath after his return than he was being...*Sentenced to 14 days F.P. No 1 for neglecting to obey orders #6 and Div. order 1404 III & trotting his horses\**. The offence – or offences – appear to have occurred on February 28, 1916, and the sentences awarded a month later, on March 21.



*\*What these orders may have been has as yet been impossible to ascertain.*

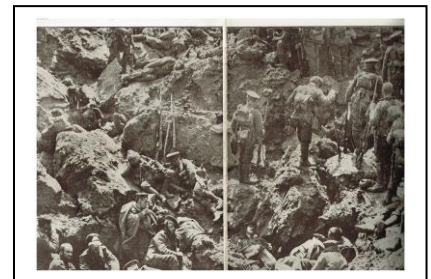
(Right above: *These are not draught horses but Royal Horse Artillery mounts with their handler just prior to the Great War. – from a vintage post-card*)

In the early part of the spring of 1916 there was to be fought, five kilometres down the line from Ypres towards the Franco-Belgian frontier, officially from March 27 up until the third week in April, the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*; this had primarily involved British and then Canadian troops, but these latter were to be troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division – not to forget, of course, there was also the involvement of the *German Army*.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had been serving in the sector since the previous September, yet this was to be the baptism of fire for its units. For troops eager to prove themselves in battle, it was to prove a bitter experience.

The confrontation began after the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had then pursued the explosions with an infantry attack. The role of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to have been to follow up in turn some days later the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate all the newly-won territory.

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



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

(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, possibly in the Area of St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

However, as this was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division affair, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division Train was not to be involved. In fact, during the first days of the action, the unit was in the process of transferring to another sector. On April 1 it marched in a semi-circular movement out of Belgium to the west from DeBroeken and then by stages through the area of Godwaersvelde back into Belgium to the vicinity of Poperinghe whereupon it once more became responsible for supplying the needs of a large area, on this occasion of both Belgium and France.

(continued)

The Canadians were now taking over responsibility for the sector from the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division and on April 3 the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train undertook the relief of its British counter-part and established its head-quarters in and about the community of Schoudemonthoek in a rural area to the south-west of Poperinghe.

(Right: *Both French and British graves, some nine-hundred fifty altogether, in Poperinghe New Military Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)



The reason for this move was that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division had been ordered to occupy the sector to the south of the city of Ypres and thus was to move from the right-hand side of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division to the area to its left. Only weeks earlier, the newly-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had also moved, it into the south-eastern sector of the *Ypres Salient*.

Thus the three Canadian Divisions were now to serve side by side. In fact this arrangement was to serve them well in a few weeks' time.

On June 2, the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division - and therefore overall British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of Hooze, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.



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

(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 enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while appeared to have breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were *enabled* to patch up their defences.

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



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

Badly organized, the operation had been a horrendous failure, 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.

There was a further German attack on June 6 in the area of the village of Hooze following the detonation of mines under the Canadian positions there. Once again the Canadians lost ground – which they would not recover – but the enemy was unable to exploit the situation any more than that.



(Right: *Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, where the Canadian trenches were obliterated by the German artillery: It is an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature.* – photograph from 2014)

The action at *Mount Sorrel* came to a close on the night of June 12-13, 1916, when the Canadians re-took most of the area that they had ceded to the Germans during the previous eleven days. Thus the result was *status quo*, except that the cemeteries were a little fuller.

The confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* was for the most part to be a 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division affair although other units were brought in response to the at-times critical situation. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was placed under 3<sup>rd</sup> Division Command and thus the 4<sup>th</sup> Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train which serviced the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was ordered to be ready to move when necessary.

Of primary importance was the movement of medical supplies as, of course, the medical facilities were to be employed to the benefit of the wounded, whatever unit they were attached to – or whatever army they fought for.

While the infantry was holding the line and finally counter-attacking the German positions and the artillery was organizing at short notice an improved barrage system, the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional train was ensuring – even to the point of offering services to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Divisional Train – that all necessary supplies were arriving when and where needed. The Commanding Officer of the unit, Lieutenant-Colonel Simson, was everyday inspecting facilities, equipment, animals and men to ensure that all were able to function to the maximum possible.



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

(continued)

The early part of the summer was again relatively quiet. Airplanes (*aeroplanes* as they used to be) were coming more and more into prominence as the war progressed and the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train War Diary shows that Driver Russell and his comrades-in-arms were being found by airborne bombs more often – perhaps not too surprising as the depots and refilling points likely represented substantial targets.

On a more positive note, apart from the everyday routines there were organized sports as well as the occasional concert now being offered to the Divisional Train personnel; they were likely a welcome change.



(Right: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from *Le Miroir**)

On August 12 of that summer of 1916, Lieutenant-Colonel Simson transferred his Headquarters from Schoudemonthoek – where it had been since early April of that year – to the centre of Éperleques. This community is some fifty kilometres to the west and is in northern France rather than in south-western Belgium. The 1<sup>st</sup> Company – also referred to as the Headquarters’ Company – was apparently split and sections posted variously, thus Driver Russell’s whereabouts at the time is not clear. The Train’s other three companies were stationed in other communities.

This particular posting of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train was to be of short duration as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, while also moving into the same area, was only to remain there for a brief period of training before being ordered south to the ongoing British summer offensive of *the Somme*. Thus the Divisional Train had to busy itself not only with the establishment of a number of temporary depots and refilling points but also look ahead to repeating the same tasks elsewhere in a few weeks’ time.

The Commanding Officer received his orders for the transfer to the south on the morning of August 25: it was to be a complex job. On a rainy August 28, early in the morning, some Headquarters’ staff and the Headquarters’ Company boarded a train in Audricq, its destination Auxi-le-Château, Pas-de-Calais, still some sixty kilometres distant from the battle-fields of *the Somme*. Six hours later the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company and other Headquarters’ staff followed suit.

On that same day in mid-morning the 3<sup>rd</sup> Company plus a further Headquarters contingent of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train entrained at Arcques for the journey to Candas, perhaps fifteen kilometres closer to *the Somme* than Auxi-le-Château. Meanwhile, the 4<sup>th</sup> Company and the last of the Headquarters’ people took a train at St-Omer from where it travelled south to Conteville, this last place to the south of Auxi-le-Château and also sixty kilometres or so away from the fields of battle.



(Right above: *Almost a century after some of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train passed through it on the way to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation – photograph from 2015*)

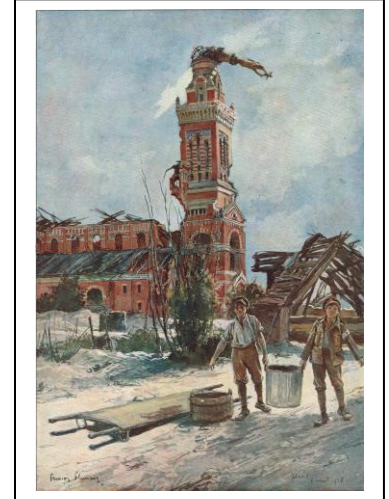
It was to be September 7, some ten days after having boarded trains in the north of France, that the Headquarters' personnel as well as the four Companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train all found their way, likely along the main highway from Doullens, to Albert and then to the vicinity of Senlis, north-westward, where the unit took over facilities previously used by the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisional Train.



(Right above: *The small, country town of Doullens at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work carrying water in the centre of Albert: the already-damaged basilica is to be seen in the background. – from Illustration*)

Lieutenant Colonel Simson, writing his entry in the War Diary for September 5, seems to have been pleased, having visited the Australian quarters, for a completely different reason: *...I visited their HQrs and found the 'Q' staff in a dugout, shrapnel proof at the end of a trench, it was electric lighted and had a telephone. This is the first time the 1<sup>st</sup> Can. Divn. has had its Headqrs in a dugout.*



The War Diary records that while en route via Albert to Senlis, the Companies had been refilling with supplies all along the way, and one may surmise that the Australians were to leave behind them what remained in their area. After all...*We are now feeding about 26,000 troops and about 12,000 horses including those of the 12<sup>th</sup> Divn. Artillery...* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for September 6, 1916)

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 had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – all in the short span of only 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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at 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, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

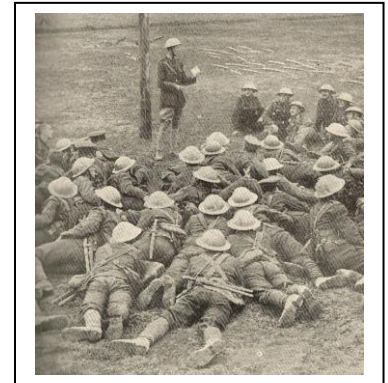
Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

(Right: *The village of Courcellette, a main objective of the attack of September 15 - just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)



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

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, however, was on the march on September 15, the day of that attack, as its units had already participated in a series of individual actions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was the one primarily involved on that day although by September 18 the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had returned from its wanderings\* to relieve the battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division in the forward area.



*\*Likely in order to free up billeting in Albert and the immediate area for other incoming troops, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had marched for days in a circular itinerary in the rear areas before returning to the area of the fighting.*

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



The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division remained in and out of the front lines for the following ten days at which time it was ordered to undertake a further march. Once more the formation was removed from the area of the fighting, on this occasion for six days, until its return on October 4 to be billeted for the night in or about the town of Albert.

Back in the trenches on the following day, three days later again its units were to participate, on October 8, in an operation against the strong German system known as Regina Trench. The attack was not a success and it was to be almost five weeks again before the strong-point finally fell to the Canadians on the night of November 10-11.



But by that time the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was no longer in the area of *the Somme*.

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

(continued)

It was from his Headquarters at Senlis that Lieutenant-Colonel Simson, and latterly his Second-in-Command, Major Greer, were to direct the comings and goings of the unit's four Companies during this entire period of five weeks, sending them to be stationed in the various communities of the *département* to satisfy the needs of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division as it both traversed the country-side and returned to serve in the war-zone.

The Headquarters' staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train remained based at Senlis until October 16 where, for the several days preceding, it had organized and supervised the retirement from the area of its personnel and materiel. This accomplished, it then took to the road itself.

Following the lead of the infantry battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, it moved in semi-circular fashion at first to the west before turning north behind Doullens and passing to the west of the battered city of Arras.

(Right below: *The city of Arras was to endure four years of bombardment during the Great War; the Grand'Place (la Grande Place) already looked like this by March of 1917 and more destruction was to follow.* – from *Le Miroir*)

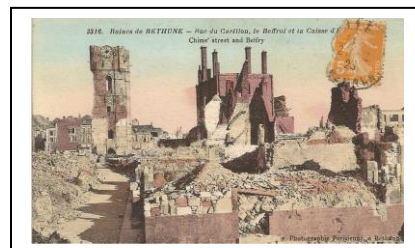
On the way it passed – at times remaining *in situ* for a while – in such places as Canaples, Bernaville and Roëllecourt before, on October 28, reaching, at least for the unit's Headquarters personnel, its destination of Estrée-Cauchy to the north-east of Arras and close to the village of Camblain-l'Abbé where the Headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had by that time been established.

These sectors to the north of Arras, and extending as far as the town of Béthune some thirty kilometres to the north were to become more and more an area of Canadian responsibility and it was into this area that, as they retired from *the Somme*, that the units of all of the four Canadian Divisions were to be stationed.

(Right above: *The remnants of the northern French town of Béthune, possibly towards the end of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

During this period of the late autumn of 1916 the priority of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train was to prepare for the winter. At this time of the year certain vital commodities were bound to be soon in short supply and stock-piling these was vital. Despite the best efforts to acquire and distribute these essentials, quantities of fodder for the animals and also heating materials for the same animals and for the personnel, they were nonetheless to prove insufficient during the winter of 1916-1917, the months of which proved to be harsh.

Even though the British – and therefore also the Commonwealth forces – was at the time the most mechanized of all the belligerent armies, it depended on animal power for much of its transport and mobility. Thus the well-being of the estimated six million – some sources cite more - horses, donkeys and mules employed by the warring nations during the *Great War* was of prime importance to all.





Fodder for the animals was more difficult to obtain in winter-time, of course, and what was available was less nutritious and sometimes even rotting. What is more, the horses, mules and donkeys in winter were required to draw wagons, guns, limbers and ambulances over poor roads, muddy roads and roads that in places no longer existed. Exhaustion among animals was commonplace and made it easier for disease to be caught.

For that eventuality the Canadian Veterinary Corps was to establish six Mobile Veterinary Stations and Two Veterinary Hospitals. The personnel apparently eventually numbered eight-hundred twenty-eight *all ranks* which by the War's end had treated some twenty-four thousand animals.

The daily care and, when necessarily, the first medical treatment of any animal was, logically, offered by the unit to which it belonged. As early as the beginning of November, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train was recording its first problems: (Excerpt from War Diary entry for November 5, 1916: *...Hay ration cut down to 6 lbs and straw bought to give horses to make up the ration...*

Although days later the animals were reported as still fit, two weeks later again, on November 18, some were by then being considered as in...*poor condition*. And on November 20...*Two lbs of Oats cut off the grain ration today...*although the rum ration of one-hundred gallons per day was still being distributed to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division by the Train.

Excerpt from War Diary entry on November 22, 1916: *...inspected the horses on Nos 2-3 & 4 Coy's and found all correct except some that were old and wanting in flesh...* But on the 29<sup>th</sup> there was good news: *The hay ration was raised to 8 lbs today.*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train moved its headquarters on December 22 and found itself in the midst of most of the staff of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division now centred on the community of Bruay: Divisional Headquarters and Engineer Headquarters as well as those of the Medical Headquarters, of the Divisional Artillery and of the Division's three Infantry Brigades were to be found elsewhere, although not far removed.



As for the four Divisional Train Companies, they also were in the region although dispersed in several locations.

(Right above: *Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension where French, British and Commonwealth dead lie side by side – photograph from 2017*)

On January 19 the Headquarters was moved eastward not many kilometres to Barlin. While not a great deal appears otherwise to have changed, one comment in the Divisional War Diary of February 5 is of interest: *...I saw the A.A.Q.M.G. re a new refilling point to be picked out tomorrow on account of our offensive to be near CAMBLAIN L'ABBE with railhead at FREVIN CAPPELLE.* The site was chosen on the following day.

But the afore-mentioned offensive was not to be undertaken for a further two months and during that winter of 1917, there was to be little concerted infantry activity undertaken by either side.

Most casualties were caused by enemy artillery - and occasionally one's own – although snipers were also a constant peril. The medical services, however, were kept mostly busy by sickness – and particularly by dental work.

That having been said, on February 23, at least one medical unit was occupied with...*73 men of HdQrs Coy sick today with poisoning from tinned rations...* There is nothing in his files, however, to suggest that Driver Russell was one of them.

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



It was during the period of March 3 to 9 that the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train – and in fact the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – moved to the area of Écoivres and Camblain-L'Abbé where, due to a lack of available billets, the Train was obliged to occupy...*an open ploughed field*. At least it was apparently a fine day.

(Right: *Camblain-l'Abbé, the village shown here to be a little less busy than it had been a hundred years before – photograph from 2017*)



While the Canadian infantry battalions were now withdrawn in rotation and undergoing special training for the upcoming offensive, the Divisional Trains and the Divisional Ammunition Columns were occupied in stock-piling supplies and munitions. The weather at the time was particularly cold and wet and the pack and draught animals were to have a rough time. Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional War Diary entry for March 24, 1917: *Our horses are falling away owing to the mud, cold and hard work...*

The practice of *clipping*\* the horses was ordered to be ongoing as of the New Year, but it was apparently not realized, or it was recognized but only much too slowly, that doing so, and then subjecting the animals to hours of standing outside in rain and snow, was detrimental to their well-being. By the end of March the Divisional Train alone was short of thirty horses, the Division of three hundred and Lieutenant Colonel Simson was recording that...*I saw many dead horses all over the country*.

*\*This was the shaving of the animal's coat during the winter months as it was felt that working with too much hair would make them too hot. However, if the animal is not working, then it requires a blanket, except that in the winter of 1917 blankets were not always available. The practice also presumes that when the horse is not working that he is in warm and sheltered quarters.*

By now, days before the offensive, Driver Russell's unit was responsible for feeding some thirty-one thousand men – soon to be thirty-five thousand - and also some twelve-thousand horses; but also by now, this excessive work and the poor condition of the roads were ensuring that the Divisional Train's War Diary entry for each day recorded a number of sick and dead animals.

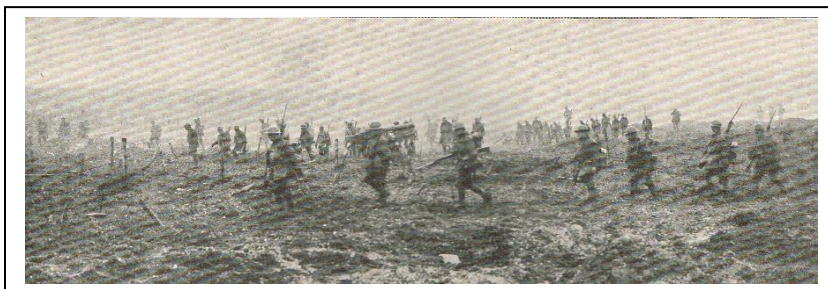
Such were the near-impossible conditions under which the various transport and supply units were to work. Thus it was that, on April 7, two days before the start of the intended offensive, rationing of food and amenities for the troops was introduced.

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



The British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment: the French offensive was to be a further disaster.

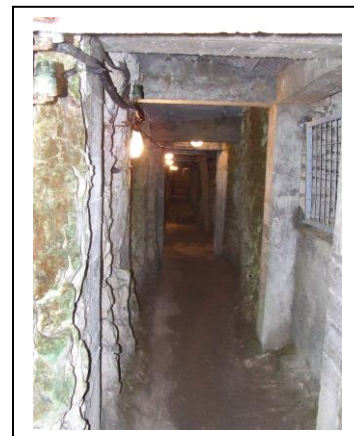
(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial* which, since 1936, has stood atop *Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)



(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division equipped 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*)

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

Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack.



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

As related above, this was the first occasion on which the Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as the Canadian Army Corps rather than being attached to a British force. In fact, a British brigade, was now fighting under its command at *Vimy Ridge* with others being held in reserve.



(Preceding page: *German prisoners being sent on their way back under escort through the Canadian lines – from Illustration*)

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions had been given the responsibility for the capture of the *Ridge* itself and, while in places the enemy resistance had posed problems, for the most part, the operation had been – perhaps unexpectedly – totally successful.

(Right: *The memorial to the fallen of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division at Vimy Ridge stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017*)



At the same time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had been given the responsibility of clearing part of the southern slope of the *Ridge*, in the area of the village of Thélus. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – at the time incorporating a British brigade – was further down the slope from Thélus, to the right of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, and operating in the area of Roclincourt, a community further to the south towards Arras. On the day, the assaults of both these Divisions had also reached all their hoped-for objectives.

The remainder of that April 9 was spent in consolidation, in repelling enemy counter-attacks, escorting prisoners to the rear and in sheltering from the inevitable German artillery retaliation which continued for the remainder of the day.

There had been, on the first days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day's success proved to be logistically impossible – the afore-mentioned mud saw to that. Thus the Germans were gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* 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.

The Trains of the four Canadian Divisions, of course, operated in the rear area of the *Western Front* during the course of the conflict and, while being shelled from afar and bombed from above was not unknown to its personnel, the perils of the infantryman's existence for the most part was. The tasks of the Divisional Trains remained much the same throughout the conflict and differed mostly in intensity. Thus, while it worked hard under poor conditions during the time of the *First Battle of Arras*, it also had worked just as hard in the weeks *prior* to that offensive.

*\*There were five Canadian Divisions but only four of them ever served on the Continent. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division remained in the United Kingdom during the Great War and operated as a training formation and also as a re-enforcement pool.*

(continued)

The priorities of Driver Russell's unit were also different from those of others. Whereas, for example, casualties, gains and losses and ammunition expenditure were the content of infantry and artillery War Diaries on May 7, the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train Diarist was reporting that... *Potatoes were issued today for the first time since 7.4.17.*

As the *Battle of Arras* progressed and units were transferred away from the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, the number of mouths to feed of course lessened...except that on April 20, the food and amenity rationing imposed prior to the fracas was countermanded, thus increasing demand by each individual mouth.

A further duty that had been imposed upon the unit in the early days of the *Great War*, by this time seems no longer to have fallen to it: the evacuation of wounded in Divisional Train wagons is not documented on a single occasion – during the *Battle* the construction of light railways may well have made the practice no longer necessary.



(Right above: *Canadian personnel and German prisoners undertake the evacuation of the wounded from Vimy Ridge on a light railway which is still in the process of being constructed. – from Illustration*)

During the latter part of the *First Battle of Arras*, most of the Divisional Train had been withdrawn to rear areas in a northerly sector. It had remained based at Haillicourt until the end of the month of May when it had been ordered to take over at *St-Éloi* the facilities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Train. Driver Russell's unit's Headquarters was to remain there at *St-Éloi* for the succeeding five weeks before moving on to the nearby *Neuville St-Vaast* Sector on July 4, 1917.

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 – as well as his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from *Béthune* to *Lens*.



(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing under fire in the Lens Sector during the late summer of 1917 – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

The Canadians would be a major contributor to this effort, the best-documented action of which was to be the confrontation fought at *Hill 70* by troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions. Thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train was to play a crucial role in the undertaking of the operation.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. This successful operation was evidence of the progress that had been recently made, particularly in artillery tactics. – photograph from 1914*)

The area in which the Canadian Corps was stationed for much of the remainder of the *Great War* after having fought at *the Somme* were the sectors stretching from Béthune in the north to Arras some thirty kilometres to the south. At the outset of the conflict this region had been the responsibility of the French Army which in 1915 had handed it over to the British as their forces grew stronger.

The economy of the area was based upon coal of which there a goodly number of seams running in a north-south manner under much of that thirty-kilometre distance. In fact in 1914 it was the source of about seventy-five per cent of coal for French industry, there being very little elsewhere in the country. While it was a prize for the Germans who were to occupy the area as of the autumn of 1914, they were unable to mine any while the fighting was ongoing; but the Germans had coal at home and, while they were unable to exploit the mines in France, they were depriving the French of this valuable resource\*.

*\*Apparently only five extraction sites, working at reduced capacity, were kept open during most of the period of the Great War.*

What was just as important to the politicians, however, was that the Germans were occupying French soil and, since the policy of the Allies – France, Great Britain and the Commonwealth – was to drive the enemy from all of the places that they had occupied, these sectors were logically areas which were going to be attacked.

From Béthune south there exists still today a string of once-mining communities: Noeux-les-Mines, Mazingarbe, Bully-les-Mines, Loos-en-Gohelle and others, a sequence which terminates at the larger centre of the city of Lens. It was here that the front lines faced each other for much of the period of the *War*, and it was in this area that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train – at Noeux-les-Mines from July 15 until August 20 of 1917 – was posted.



(Right above: *The Communal Cemetery Extension in the once-mining community of Noeux-les-Mines in which, among the graves, lie two Newfoundlanders – Private Edward Fagan and Driver Harold Albert Russell – who wore a Canadian uniform – photograph from 2014*)

Noeux-les-Mines is about a dozen kilometres removed from the northern suburbs of Lens which is where the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions on August were to attack a small promontory in the best-known operation that the Canadians were to undertake that summer.



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

**(Right: A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during 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 was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the entire area, its capture perhaps more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

**(Right below: *The mining village of Loos-en-Gohelle as it was already in 1915, before the arrival of the Canadians to the area: the structures atop the pit-heads in the centre of the photograph became known to the British troops – and thus later to the Canadians – as Tower Bridge.* – from *Le Miroir*)**

It is difficult to estimate how much the personnel of the supply and ammunition columns ever came to know about the various operations that they facilitated.

In the instance of *Hill 70*, little appears in the unit's War Diary: On August 14 it reported a that a number of gas patients had been admitted to the nearby Field Ambulance and that shells were falling near the lines of Number 2 Company; the entry of August 15, the day of the attack, records that...*Our infantry have gained their objectives but it is rather an anxious day; and at or about mid-night...30 teams sent out...to help artillery with ammunition.*



It can be surmised that these munitions were necessary to forestall a German counter-attack of which several were eventually made. Most of these were not particularly successful as the Canadian Artillery fire was well directed and anticipated the enemy's movements. But the Divisional Train's records do not provide any further details.

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

By August 21 the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was retiring into a rest area after its efforts and Driver Russell's unit was doing likewise: Headquarters was moving towards the area of Bruay and the unit's Companies into the surrounding communities.



(continued)

(Right below: *Troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)

The Canadian-led operations in the Lens-Béthune Sector had still been incomplete towards the end of August when the British High Command decided to cancel any further actions there other than defensive ones\*. Things were not going altogether as planned in that summer campaign further north and the British were short of men. The Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians were to be called upon to remedy that shortage.



*\*This did not, however, preclude raids – still encouraged and still a favourite of Haig and the British High Command.*

The Lens-Béthune campaign thus having been drawn to a close, it was to be almost seven weeks after its withdrawal to the area of Bruay and nearby Barlin before its next move. In these two places the unit was re-organized and re-equipped where necessary and also welcomed re-enforcements since, until these reported *to duty*, the Divisional Train was under establishment strength.

Not that this period in reserve was all militarily oriented as there was the occasional concert and, more and more, sports – both intra- and inter-unit – were coming into vogue. Towards the end of September it was the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division that was to win the Canadian Corps Sports Day, although how much Driver Russell and the Divisional Train contributed to that victory does not appear in his dossier.

It was three days after this latter event, on September 30, that Driver Russell began a period of leave granted to him to spend in the United Kingdom. There is no apparent record of where or how he spent his time, although the majority of such furloughs were, unsurprisingly, spent in London unless one had family elsewhere. He returned *to duty* on October 14, just in time to join his Company's move towards Belgium.



(Right above: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 6, Train Headquarters and at least two Companies were ordered to move for a week to Château de la Haie, no more than eight kilometres distant to the south before being ordered back to the area of Barlin once more. A further eight days were to pass there before the different Companies began again to move, on this occasion to the north and towards the Franco-Belgian frontier.

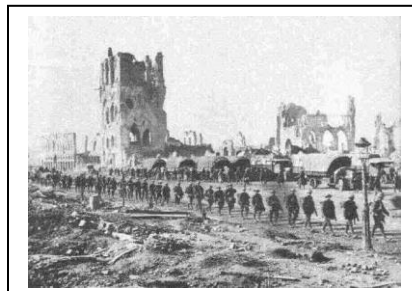
And the long-suffering animals were once again being fed a partial diet of straw due to a further lack of hay.

(continued)



The Canadians by this time had been ordered to join the British offensive ongoing since the final day of that July in Belgium, to the north-east of Ypres and, once more, in the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was to become better known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that - ostensibly - was one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right: *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*)



From the time that the Canadians entered the fray - after the *Anzacs\** - it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which spear-headed the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions in reserve.

*\*The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps*

From November 5 until the official end of the affair - November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.



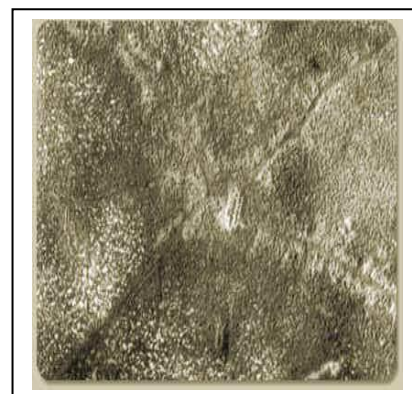
(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere - or just about everywhere - on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the dreadful autumn of 1917 - from Illustration*)

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



Having moved northwards on or about October 22, the Divisional Train established its Headquarters in the community of Eecke on the French side of the border from where were now to be directed the unit's operations for the following days.

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



The work of the various Companies was more and more to be in the area of Ypres where were soon to be the almost fifteen-thousand personnel and just under thirteen-hundred horses, the provision of whose supplies were the responsibility of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Train.

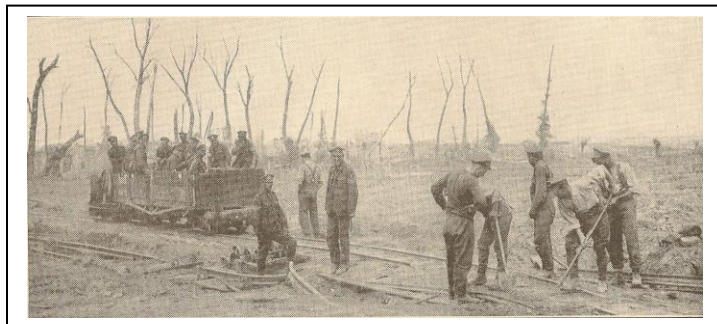
The Train's work-load was soon to be more than doubled as by November 3 these numbers had risen to forty-thousand men and ten-thousand animals - the daily rum ration was by now two-hundred fifty gallons\*.

By now the railhead supplying the Divisional Train was as close as Vlamertinghe, a village not far distant to the west of Ypres.

*\*The unloading and stock-piling of one-hundred sixty-one tons of coal that arrived at the railhead on November 7 and 9 likely posed greater problems.*

*(Right below: A light railway being constructed to facilitate the movement of supplies and munitions towards the forward area; it also allowed for the transfer of troops to the front and for that of both troops and wounded towards the rear area – from Illustration)*

By the first week in November, as seen in a previous paragraph, it was the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadians who were leading in the attack in the area from Zonnebeke to Passchendaele, having relieved the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions\*. The village itself was stormed and fell on November 6, but the fighting was to continue officially for yet another week.



*\*This is not to belittle the contribution of the British troops – or any others - who were still serving in the area and of whom more than a quarter-million were to become casualties.*

*(Right: In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial. – photograph from 2010)*



On November 10 preparations were being made for the return to France, a German plane delivering a farewell gift that made casualties of three horses and nine of the unit's personnel while the unit was loading one of its last deliveries.

On the morrow, November 11, the Headquarters' staff moved back to France as did the Number 2 Company. Two days later, three of the four of the Train's Companies were back in France and the unit's Headquarters had returned to Barlin which it had left a month before. There remained in Belgium only Driver Russell's Number 1 (Headquarters') Company – since some 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division units were still there as well – which was posted close to the town of Poperinghe and was working in the area of the railhead at Vlamertinghe close to Ypres. The Company – and one may presume Driver Russell – were to stay there until the end of that November.

(continued)

As the system of delivery of supplies to the area in northern France were still evolving, the stay in the vicinity of Barlin lasted only six days. A light railway line transferring goods from there to Carency now necessitated the transfer of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Companies to Carency and thus Headquarters to nearby Château de la Haie on November 17.

Only thirty-three days following, for a reason undocumented in the Divisional Train War Diary, it was seen fit to change the locale of the railhead for a further time – on this occasion to Houdain – and thus the Divisional Train on December 20 was moved once more: to Bruay.

After the chaos of *Passchendaele* and the return of the Canadian Corps to those sectors between Béthune and Arras, life for 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division personnel returned to the everyday routines of soldiers of the *Great War*. However, during the month of December there was something a little different to remind the Canadians of home: the National General Election.

The officers and men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train voted on December 1 while at Château de la Haie – whether they could have done so on any other day, the unit's War Diary does not record. Nor does it document the percentage of the personnel who exercised the right to vote; if it was similar to the number cited in many of the battalion journals, it may have been over ninety per cent.

Thus passed Christmas of 1917 and New Year's Day of 1918, the former celebrated with separate Company dinners at which the Acting Officer Commanding, Major Greer, presented greetings - the latter day was not celebrated at all.

On January 21, once more the railhead on which the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division depended for its supplies was changed. It was now moved from Houdain to Barlin and, two days later, on to Sains-Bouvigny. Thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train – and the Divisional Army Column which was now attached to it – moved to the area of Noeux-les-Mines, with its Headquarters now to be located at Braquemont\*.



*\*The succeeding paragraphs may give an idea – quite inadequate, it should be admitted – of why the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Train changed its railhead so often.*

(Right above: *Barlin Communal Cemetery Extension, in which there are buried eleven-hundred fifteen military personnel – of both sides - of the Great War: As the cemetery was in the rear area, in the vicinity of medical facilities, all of its dead have been identified. – photograph from 2015*)

During the preparations, during the action itself, and for the seventeen months after the Canadian capture of *Vimy Ridge*, the Canadian Railway Troops were extremely busy in those sectors between Béthune and Arras, building a network of both standard-gauge, light railways and tram-lines\*, much of the material having been brought across the Atlantic from Canada.

*\*They had built them on top of Vimy Ridge itself even as the fighting was ongoing.*

An article a propos this Canadian effort found in *Canadian Rail No 437 1993 Exporail* cites: *Construction was carried on steadily throughout 1917, and the ground won at the battles of Vimy Ridge, Hill 65, Avion and Hill 70 was covered with 2-foot tracks, so that by the end of 1917 the Canadian front was better served by light railways than any other sector of the British front\**.



*\*It should not be forgotten that this is written about only the light railways, and that the area was also the scene of construction by tramway and standard-gauge crews.*

(Right above: *A Canadian-built railway constructed through the remnants of the city and mining-centre of Lens as it was in the autumn of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

On February 14 Major Greer recorded in the unit's War Diary that he had...*attended dinner and re-union of original officers who arrived in France with 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division in Feb'y, 1915.* One may imagine there having been a certain amount of mixed emotion among those who attended.

The winter of 1917-1918 thus passed quietly in much the same manner as had the preceding winters of the *Great War*. Rationing for both personnel and animals was again temporarily introduced: fewer oats for the latter and less tea for the former. Perhaps it was with this in mind that on February 21 the Commanding Officer, Major Greer...*went out with Camp Commandant and selected piece of ground adjoining Divisional Farm which we are to plough up and use as a Divisional Train garden...* Oats perhaps, but surely not tea...

During all of this time since mid-January, the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Train had remained based on the community and vicinity of Noeux-les-Mines, the railhead on which the Train – and thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – depended, having stayed at Sains-Bouvigny. The War Diary entries for the period were about inspections, dinners, awards, horses, promotions, other details and often...*nothing of importance...*

...not even on March 21, the first day of spring, 1918.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in that spring of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the Great 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 stationed there.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack the city of 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 to thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from a vintage post-card*)



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 the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29<sup>th</sup> 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*)

News of what was a disaster appears not to have spread very quickly to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train, at least not to its Commanding Officer and War Diarist. The Headquarters of the unit was transferred to the area of Château de la Haie on March 24-25, but only one Company moved with it.



On the morrow, March 26, the War Diary recorded the following: *Six hours to move if necessary, at one hours notice after 5.30 a.m. 26<sup>th</sup>. Adjutant seeking locations for Companies... Division ordered into Army Reserve in Écoivres area. Planning moves and getting out orders till 3. A.m. 27<sup>th</sup>.*

Thus it was on March 27 that the entire unit was assembled in proximity to the Train Headquarters and on the following morning that it moved – fully loaded – in response to the emergency, some twenty or more kilometres to the south-west of Arras in the eventuality of a possible German attack in front of Arras. There was at the time some confusion as to where the attack was falling - or was going to fall but by night-fall the unit's Headquarters was established at Fosseux from where it was now to organize things.

The Divisional Train during the next three days and nights was to establish several dumps and was to work out of two railheads, at Frévin-Cappelle and Agnez-les-Duisans, to do so.

But by April 1 the situation appears to have become settled, to the point where the new Commanding Officer of the Train, Lieutenant Colonel Corrigan, was able to take the time to...*secure the loan of a Typewriter, the need of which has been long felt\**...

*\*The War Diary continued to be written by hand.*

By April 2, although the Train remained based on Fosseux and its railhead continued to be Agnez-les-Duisans – and although the...*Rum issue limited to troops in line; Twice weekly - the daily routines were once more being followed and the Commanding Officer was able to re-commence frequent inspections of his four Companies.*

Then, on April 8, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train was ordered back towards the area of its posting just prior to the crisis. Its Headquarters were now at Étrun, closer to Arras, and its railhead was at Mont St-Éloi. Driver Russell's Number 1 (Headquarters') Company was to be based at or near Frévin-Capelle, a village ten kilometres to the north-west of Arras.

(continued)

Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Divisional Train War Diary entry for April 9, 1918: ...Back area heavily shelled. Casualties principally in No 4 Coy. as follows: Men killed 4, wounded 18. Horses – killed 7.



Circumstances of casualty: “Killed in Action” When employed as a saddler at ÉCOIVRES, he was instantly killed by a shell which landed in the Camping Lines.

(Right above: Écoivres Military Cemetery, Commune of Mont St-Éloi, in which Driver Russell is buried, as it was towards the end of - or just after - the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The son of Alexander Leon King, farmer (also farm labourer) at Bally Haly, and of Mary Anne King (née Russell\*?) – to whom, she documented as Mary Russell, as of September 1 of 1914, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars\*\* from his pay (there appears to be no will among his papers) - of 50½, Monkstown Road, St. John’s, Newfoundland, he was also brother to James-Alexander (b. 1887) and to John-Henry (b.1888).

\*There appears to be no explanation why both she and her son went by the name Russell. Her address as Mary Anne King, in or about 1921, is cited as 232, Richmond Street, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and also as 11, Upper Hillsboro Street in the same city.

\*\*A second series of records says fifteen dollars.

Ancestry.ca also lists siblings Arthur (b. 1889), Ted (b. 1890), Herbert (b. 1892), Hilda (b. 1894), Annie-May (1890) and Lily (b. 1893). Parish Records – which cease after 1891 – confirm only James Alexander and John Henry (seen further above); apart from the lack of church records, the dates make others unlikely.

Driver Russell was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 9, 1918, while serving in the area of Écoivres.

William Thomas King (served as *Russell*) had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-three years and one month: date of birth in St. John’s, Newfoundland (not Saint John, New Brunswick, as recorded elsewhere), August 1, 1891 (attestation papers). Saint Thomas’ Church Anglican Parish Records, St. John’s, Newfoundland, cite August 9, 1891.

Driver William Thomas Russell was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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