

Private William Thomas Russell (Number 838173) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today Ieper): Panel reference 30-32.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-flash of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.)

His occupations recorded as that of a *kitchen porter* in a coffee shop before he left England and as that of a farmer in Canada, William Thomas Russell did not depart from the Old Country until after the taking of the 1911 Census. There appear to be no further details of his movements until late in the year 1915 when he is recorded as having been present in the rural Ontario community of Dundalk, because that is when and where he enlisted into the Canadian Army.

(continued)

Private Russell's first medical records date from October 14, 1915, and pronounce him as fit for overseas service\* in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. They also document this as day on which he enlisted. His first pay records of that time, however, contradict this and suggest that November 6, 1915, was the date on which he was *taken on strength* by the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Grey)\*\*.

*\*He was apparently recruited by the 31<sup>st</sup> Grey Regiment of the Canadian Militia on behalf of the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Grey). The Canadian Militia, by law, was restricted to operations within the borders of Canada, but could recruit, as in the case of Private Russell, on behalf of the new Overseas Battalions being formed for war-time service.*

*\*\*The 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Grey) and Grey County, Ontario, are named for Charles Grey, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Grey, one-time British Prime Minister. His name is probably known best in Canada to tea-drinkers, although the stories linking him to Earl Grey Tea are likely apocryphal.*

Whereas this initial medical examination and enlistment had taken place in Dundalk, his attestation – and a second medical – were not to be undergone for a further seven weeks or so, on December 4, 1915, and, on this occasion, at Owen Sound. It may well be that by this time Owen Sound was Private Russell's place of residence, his address at that time cited by him as 1148, 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Owen Sound.

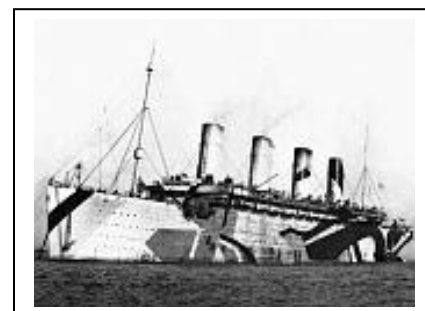
The formalities of the entire undertaking of enlistment appear to have been brought to a conclusion by a Lieutenant Colonel Chisholm\* who on that same December 4 declared – on paper – that...*William Thomas Russell...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

*\*His written initials of this officer do not appear to be G.T. which are those of the Lieutenant Colonel Chisholm who later took command of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion, then of the 5<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) Battalion. He who certified Private Russell appears to be anonymous.*

The 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion was initially based in Owen Sound where it likely trained at the local Armoury; Private Russell was transferred to the Battalion's signals unit during this period, on January 23 of the New Year, 1916. The unit then moved for further training in May of 1916 to *Camp Niagara* at Niagara-on-the-Lake before, only some two months later again, it was transferred to *Camp Borden* on July 4.

It was *at Borden* that its Colours were presented to it on August 21, and it was *from Borden* that Private Russell's Battalion, on October 5, began its journey to the east-coast harbour of Halifax.

After eight days of travel by train, on October 13, the personnel of the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister-ship of *Britannic* – to be lost to a mine in the Mediterranean only one month later – and of the ill-starred *Titanic*.



(Right above: *The photograph of Olympic, shown here in her war-time dazzle camouflage, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Private Russell and his unit were not to travel alone: on board the vessel were also the 173<sup>rd</sup>, the 180<sup>th</sup>, the 194<sup>th</sup>, the 222<sup>nd</sup> and one-half of the 166<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry plus the 9<sup>th</sup> Draft of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division Signals Company. Some six-thousand military personnel were to take passage for the trans-Atlantic crossing.

*Olympic* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 20, having sailed from Halifax some six days prior to that. Upon its arrival in the United Kingdom the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion entrained for the journey to Shoreham-on-Sea on the south coast of the country. There the unit was to remain for the following ten weeks – as the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Grey*).

On New Year's Day of 1917, however, Private Russell's Battalion, the 147<sup>th</sup>, was absorbed into the newly-forming Canadian 8<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion. This may well have been simply a change of designation as much as anything else as it was Lieutenant Colonel M.F. McFarland, commanding officer of the 147<sup>th</sup> Battalion who became the C.O. of the 8<sup>th</sup> (*Reserve*) Battalion (*Central Ontario*)\*.

*\*Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to despatch overseas two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

*However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly as of January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.*

Private Russell remained with the 8<sup>th</sup> (*Reserve*) Battalion (*Central Ontario*) at Shoreham for the succeeding sixteen weeks. On April 21 he was transferred to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion and sent to the military establishment of *Shorncliffe* on the Kentish coast and in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone. If in fact he reported to *Shorncliffe* as late as that April 21, then he was to spend less than a day there.



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

On the morrow Private Russell was *taken on strength* by the Canadian Base Depot\*, *Rouelles Camp*, in close proximity to the French port-city of Le Havre. He had travelled overnight through the ports of Folkestone and Boulogne, one of almost two-thousand re-enforcements sent from the United Kingdom on that day.



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

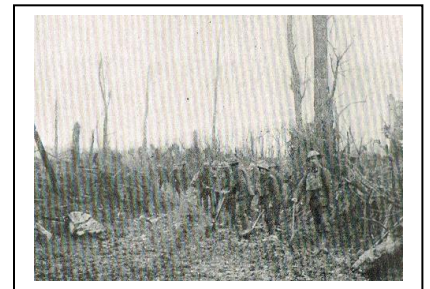
***\*The role of the Base Depot was to take the personnel arriving from England and those returning from hospital on the Continent and to train and organize them until such time as the units to which they had been attached were in a position to accept them.***

Private Russell had only three days to wait before he was on his way from the Base Depot; on April 25 he was one of eleven-hundred four re-enforcements to be despatched to various units.

Then he disappeared for sixteen days.

It was usually only a matter of one or two days before re-enforcements from Base Depot reported to their new units – they did not often spend sixteen days wandering around the country-side. His records document nothing of this period. Nevertheless, the possibility exists, although not recorded, that Private Russell was sent to an entrenching battalion\* as was often the practice at the time when the Base Depot was becoming over-crowded and when the expectant unit was not in a position to accept its incoming soldiers.

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

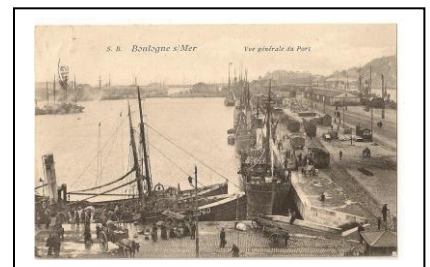


***(Right above: Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this also being a job to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned. – from Le Miroir or Illustration)***

It was not until May 11 that Private Russell reported *to duty* with the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion, one of sixty-nine *other ranks* recorded by the Battalion War Diarist as having arrived on that day. The new-comers were likely invited to remain in the rear area for a number of days as the Battalion had only the day before, on May 10, moved up into front and support positions in the area of *Vimy Ridge*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Almost seventeen months before, in 1915, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles Regiment of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had disembarked in the French port of Boulogne – all but its transport, which had passed through Le Havre - on the evening of October 24, and two days later had entrained for the one-hundred thirteen kilometre – yet still five-hour – railway-journey to the northern French town of Bailleul.



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

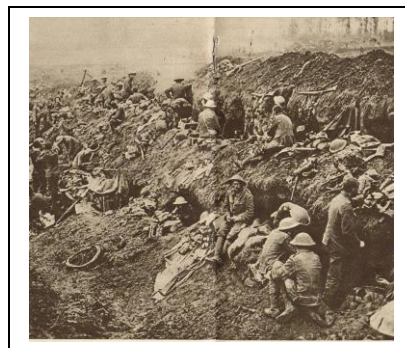
(continued)



There the unit had remained *in situ* until November 2 when it had been ordered eastward to the town of Neuve-Église before turning north to cross the frontier into Belgium, there to billet at *Camp Aldershot*\*. On the following day the Regimental personnel had begun to move by rote for twenty-four hours in the trenches, there to gain a first-hand experience of life in the forward area\*\*.

*\*Not to be confused with Camp Aldershot in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, nor with the British Army Complex of the same name in southern England.*

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



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

*(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the year, 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and also the less-evident British-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)*

The Regiment had retired on November 10 and much of the remainder of that month and most of December was to be spent relatively peacefully behind the lines. As the days had passed, a good deal of time would be allotted to parades of all types, these interspersed with the occasional game of football and sometimes even a bath - but reports of any horses were soon no longer to be found in the Regimental War Diary.

By now it had been becoming progressively evident that the once-mounted troopers were to soon operate as foot-soldiers: on December 31 of 1915 the War Diary had recorded... *Infantry instruction now commences for all ranks. General Alderson talks to all officers on subject of change of establishment. This Regiment is now in the 8<sup>th</sup> Can. Infantry Bgde. And is in the 3<sup>d</sup> Canadian Division.*

*\*All of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade's four infantry battalions, as of mid-night of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916, were dis-mounted Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Battalions. Prior to that, the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, CMR, had been a unit of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mounted Rifle Brigade and the troopers had, as the name implies, horses. In order for it to become an infantry battalion, not only were the Regiment's horses sent elsewhere – often to officers serving behind the lines – but the Regiment, not being of regular infantry battalion strength, had to absorb personnel from other Mounted Regiments, units which, while not immediately disbanded, were thereafter no longer active. Thus by January 1 the CMR Regiments had become CMR Battalions.*

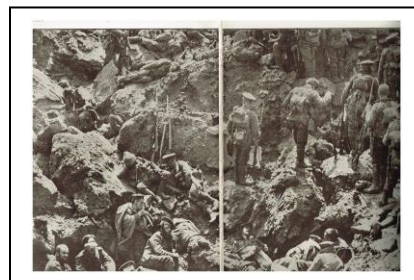
Thus the winter of 1915-1916 was to pass relatively inactively as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had still been awaiting units to arrive from the United Kingdom – these had reported *to duty* in February. Apart from the routine patrols and the occasional raids – by both sides – there was to be little to report in the way of infantry activity; most casualties that had come about were to be due to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers.

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 the latter were to be troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division – not to forget, of course, there had also been the participation 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 first major baptism of fire for its units. For troops eager to prove themselves in battle, it was to prove a bitter experience.

The confrontation had begun when 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 to consolidate all the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence was to greet the newcomers who had taken 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*)

But the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion was not to be involved at St-Éloi. By that time it had been posted to the area of *Sanctuary Wood*, in the south-east sector of the *Ypres Salient*, and not far removed from the battered – even in those early days – remnants of the medieval city of Ypres itself.



The dismounted 4<sup>th</sup> Mounted Rifles' first *major* confrontation with the enemy was yet to come and a further six weeks were yet to pass.

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

(continued)

Then, on June 2, the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under Canadian and British control. This was to be just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *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: *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, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while appeared to have breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to thus be *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 – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was to prove a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to go in; the others had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to pieces. The enemy had remained in his captured positions and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles had been manning a section of the front line on June 2. The entire sector, in fact, since the end of March and the beginning of April, had been the responsibility of the novice 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division and it had been on this formation that the brunt of the enemy attack was to fall.



(Right above: *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*)

(continued)



Excerpts from the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion War Diary entry for June 2, 1916, give some idea of the intensity of the German offensive: *At 8.30 a.m. the enemy commenced a bombardment... The bombardment increased and we were bombarded in the front line, supports, and reserves, by thousands of shells of every description. This bombardment was most intense. The front line was also bombarded by trench mortars... 11.30, he (the Commanding Officer of the forward platoon) sent out his remaining men who were mostly wounded, and when his last men had left, he came out himself.*

Later on that day a further order...*came to withdraw.* However, the Battalion had been so shattered that there was to be no cohesion in anything that would now occur. The 5<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion in support, had been able neither to glean information of any kind from - nor to establish any contact with - the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion at all. The War Diary entry of the next day, June 3, had recorded that... *During the day the scouts of the battalion who had survived made numerous trips through the area... A few more men reported making 56 in all... By that evening there would be sixty-four: by the next morning, seventy-three.*

On June 5 the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, CMR, Had been ordered withdrawn well to the rear, into France to the area of Steenvoorde. It was to play no further role in the struggle for *Mount Sorrel.*

The action would come to a close on the night of June 12-13 when the Canadians had re-taken most of the area that they had ceded to the Germans eleven days previously. Thus the result was to end *status quo*, except that the cemeteries were a little fuller – and more numerous.



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

It appears not to have been until July 14 that the unit had begun to make its way towards the forward area once more, into the remnants of Ypres. It was then to be a further nine days before it had been despatched to the front. In the meantime it had supplied daily working-parties which, inevitably at Ypres, would incur casualties in the performance of their duties.

During the succeeding five weeks, until August 22, the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had submitted to the routines and rigours of trench warfare. After its final retirement from the front it had been ordered to return to the area of Steenvoorde on August 25 for special training.

By this time the British summer offensive in France, further to the south, had been proceeding less well than had been presumptuously predicted by the British High Command. Losses had been excessively high and thus troops from the Dominions of the British Empire (*Commonwealth*) had been ordered\* to prepare for service at *the Somme.*

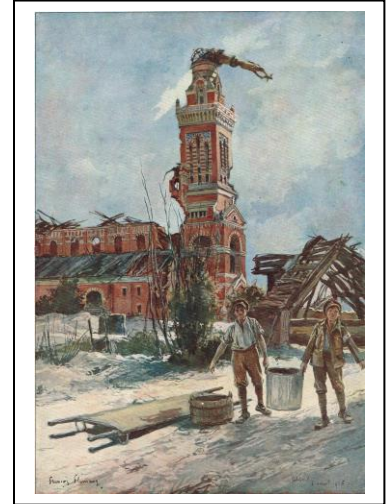
*\*During the Great War it was the British Government which directed the foreign relations of the Dominions and thus, in the same manner, British High Command took charge of the efforts of the Dominions' armed forces. It was in 1931 that this arrangement came officially to a close, the Statute of Westminster removing the ability of the British Government to legislate on behalf of Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and Newfoundland.*



On September 7 the Battalion had moved from Steenvoorde by bus and on foot to the railway station at Cassel and had boarded a train. After an overnight journey the unit would arrive in the community of Candas, from there to continue its transfer – once more by bus and on foot – onwards to the provincial town of Albert and to the large military camp to the community's north-west: *Brickfields*.

The unit had arrived at the camp at approximately mid-day of September 11. Six-and-a-half hours later it had left again to proceed to the forward area.

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



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

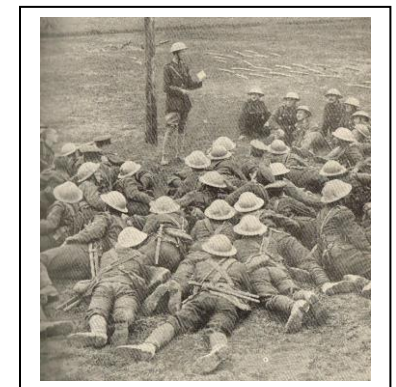
(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions having been 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 a place called Beaumont-Hamel.



As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), had been 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 had been in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

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



The 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion was to be a part of that general offensive, an assault planned for September 15. The Operational Order Number 29, issued two days prior to the action, had outlined the role of the unit: *Attack to be made in two waves. Second wave to start 3 minutes after first wave and to go through first wave on to the second objective.*

***Attack to be started at ZERO – to be notified later.***

The offensive was to last about thirty-six hours for the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion after its initial attack at six-thirty on the evening of September 15\*. It had then been ordered to retire at six on the morning of September 17.

***\*The first attacks by other units had gone in some twelve hours earlier.***

The objectives and responsibilities of the Battalion had been...***to bomb out Germans' first and second line trenches to the west as far as possible and to build a fire communication trench...to present front line.*** (Excerpt from Commanding Officer's Report)

The 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had achieved its objectives and in doing so had incurred a total of two-hundred one casualties of which thirty-four had been reported as ***killed in action.***

Now, for a week, the unit would remain well to the rear, to the areas of Warloy-Baillon and Bouzincourt for re-enforcement and re-organization, from there to return to ***Tara Hill Camp*** and to the forward area on September 27. Sporadic fighting over the next days was to be experienced in supporting other units of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, but it was not to be until October 1 that the next large offensive had taken place. It was to be against the German trench system and strong-point known as ***Regina Trench.***



(Right above: ***Ninety-eight years later, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014***)

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



The assault was to be unsuccessful. By the end of the second day of the attack by troops of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, the German had successfully repulsed all the Canadian efforts. In the few originally successful areas the enemy had counter-attacked to good effect and the attackers were to be pushed back into their original positions.



There appears to be no record of the casualties of the Battalion on this occasion, but the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade's four battalions, collectively, were to incur some nine-hundred thirty during the days of October 1 and 2.

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

(continued)

The 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades had been the next to attempt the capture of the *Regina Trench* system. This attack was to be on October 8 but on this occasion the 8<sup>th</sup> CI Brigade was to serve as Divisional Reserve and had played only a peripheral role. This endeavour would be no more successful than had been its predecessor – or its successors up until the night of November 10-11 when the strong-point had been definitively wrested from the Germans' hands.

Well before that last date, however, the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and the other units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had retired from *the Somme* and had by then established themselves in another sector of the *Western Front*.

In fact it was only days after the efforts of October 8 by the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades, both these units also of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, that the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had marched away from *the Somme*. Having relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> CMR Battalion in the line on October 13, on the following night the 4<sup>th</sup> in turn was to be relieved and to withdraw to billets in Albert. On the next morning it had been on its way westward before turning to the north, and by October 24 had passed to the western side of the battered city of Arras to continue onward in a north-westerly direction. It had then eventually relieved a battalion of the London Regiment in Brigade Reserve at Anzin-St-Aubin.

(Right: *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 was to follow. – from Le Miroir*)



By the last day of October, the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had returned to the front-line trenches, having relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR Battalion on that same day.

However, contrary to most comments in most entries that he had penned while serving on *the Somme*, the Battalion War Diarist was on several occasions now able to record in his journal...*Situation quiet.*

*\*The last units of the Canadian Corps left the area of the Somme battlefields during the first half of December to move northwards. The area from Arras as far as the northern town of Béthune, some thirty kilometres away, was now becoming a Canadian responsibility.*

It was to continue that way: seven wounded and one accidentally killed reported for the entire month of November; several more during December but then fewer again in January.

The winter of 1916-1917 – as with all the winters of the *Great War* - was to be one of that everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches. There was to be little, if any, concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides.

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



(continued)



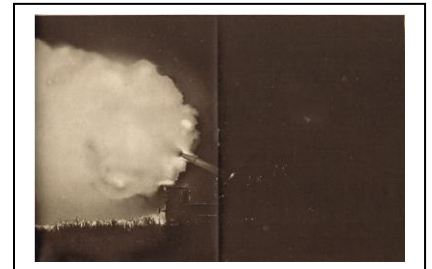
This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt them to be a morale booster which also served to keep the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – in general, the troops who were ordered to carry them out loathed these operations.

Casualties, as seen above, were to be light and it was to be myriad sicknesses and, perhaps a little surprisingly, dental work, that would keep the medical facilities busy during this winter period.

The 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had been shuffled around as per the usual routine of the trenches, then, towards the end of February it had been ordered to Burbure further to the north for a period of training that was to last until the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month of March.

It was a scenario to be followed by most of the units of the Canadian Corps. Not only were the training areas busy but the rear areas were hives of activity: roads and railways were being constructed; pipes for water, telephone cables were being laid and buried; ammunition dumps and storage areas cleared; artillery positions excavated and camouflaged; trenches – approach, communication and assault – dug; medical centres, observation posts and those well-known tunnels were being hewn out of the chalky sub-soil; re-enforcements in their thousands were arriving; the list continues...

And as those final days had passed, the preparatory artillery barrage\* which was to officially commence on April 2 had been growing progressively heavier. On April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion was to describe it simply as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans had undoubtedly been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in turn had been throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were to be very busy.



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

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

For its part, the infantry was to be undertaking raids on the enemy front lines seeking information about the German positions, wire and personnel opposite them.

By April 8... *Final arrangements completed. Conference with Company Commanders & Officers in charge of details at 2 p.m. – Plans were discussed and final details arranged.* (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary for April 8, 1918)

And later that night... *the Companies assembled in jumping-off Trenches.*

(continued)



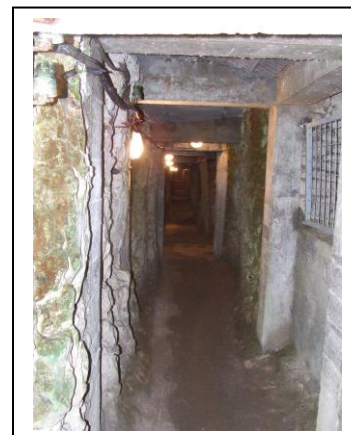
On April 9 the British Army had launched its offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it would be the most expensive operation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



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

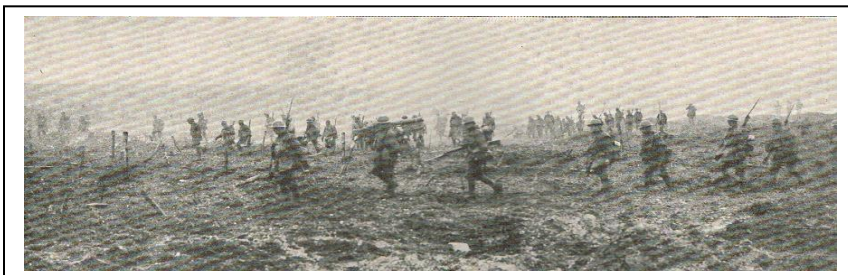
(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – indeed, on this occasion, British troops had been placed under *Canadian* command – had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared the area almost the entirety of its German occupants.



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

(Right: *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*)



*At a time and a place to be notified later, the Canadian Corps will, in conjunction with a larger operation by the Third Army on the right, attack and capture VIMY RIDGE.*

*The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division will attack with two Brigades in Line and one in Reserve as follows:-*

*8<sup>th</sup> C.I.B. on the Right.*

*7<sup>th</sup> C.I.B. on the Left.*

*9<sup>th</sup> C.I.B. in Reserve.*



(Right above: *Canadians under shell-fire occupy the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge, anonymous dead lying in the foreground: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)

(The above is an excerpt from the issued *Instructions to the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade for the Attack and Capture of Vimy Ridge*)

The attack on the summit of *Vimy Ridge* itself was to be undertaken by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions. To the right, where the slope descends southwards towards the villages of Thélus and Roclincourt, then eventually towards Arras, it was to be the responsibility of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division – with an attached British Brigade - and of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division to see off the enemy.

To that end, in the late evening of April 8 and the night of April 8-9 the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had moved forward through *Goodman Tunnel* and into its assembly trenches. At Zero Hour...5.30 a.m...*The Artillery, Machine Guns and 4” Stokes Guns opened fire as arranged and Infantry attacked.*

*5.36 a.m. Assaulting troops reported having entered enemy’s front and immediate support trenches, and rear waves cleared the enemy’s front line...*

*5.46 a.m. ...Infantry have commenced consolidating enemy’s front and immediate support trenches.*

*5.56 a.m. ...Parties of German prisoners being escorted back through craters.*

*8.05 a.m. Reports from centre and left Battalions that consolidation of the Final Objective progressing satisfactorily...*

(The above are excerpts from Appendix D of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, War Diary for the month of April, 1917)

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



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

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 had subsequently proved to be impossible, largely because of the weather and of course the orders *to consolidate*.

Once having lost *Vimy Ridge* and any advantages of the high ground, the enemy had then retreated some three kilometres into prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks were also to re-claim ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle (see below) in early May.

And it was just as the *Battle of Arras* was drawing to its close that Private Russell had reported *to duty* with the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion.

\* \* \* \* \*

After *Arras*, and even prior to its conclusion, the situation had slowly reverted again to that of everyday trench warfare which now included the frequently-reported intrusion of hostile aircraft. Until the end of June the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion when in reserve was withdrawn to Villers-au-Bois; when on support and front-line duty, it was to find itself for the most part in the area designated as *Vimy Defences*.

With the onset of the month of July, the unit was shuttled between the forward lines - where some of the time would be spent burying some of the bodies which were littering the area - and the rearward area in order to undergo training.

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



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

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

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



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

(Right above: *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. – photograph from 1914*)



Yet *Hill 70* had been high enough to have been considered - by no-one less than the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – as the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of *Lens* itself.

(continued)



(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)



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

These defences had held firm and the Canadian artillery, by then employing newly-developed procedures, would inflict heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* was thus to remain in Canadian hands.

(Right above: *Canadian 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*)



(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here in the summer of 1917 under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action by personnel of the Canadian Garrison Artillery – from Le Miroir*)



The attack was to be the responsibility of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division troops, thus the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – including the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion - was not a part of this offensive; but yet, at the same time, it was moving forward from the rear area to take advantage of any retreat by the Germans.

It was just days later, on or about August 20-21, that the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was to take over billets from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade at Les Brébis, just to the south of Mazingarbe. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division and *that* formation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had been involved in the storming of *Hill 70*; it was now, relieved by the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion to retire for a well-deserved rest.



This newest posting of the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion was not to last long: by the end of the month the Battalion had retired to the area of Mont St-Éloi\*. From there it moved to *Winnipeg Camp* and from there to the area of La Chaudière to relieve a British battalion.



*\*Not to be confused with the Belgian village of St-Éloi where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had fought during the spring of 1916.*

(continued)



(Preceding page: *The Canadian National Monument on Vimy Ridge as seen when looking southwards from the Chaudière Sector which had been German occupied territory on April 9, 1917 – photograph from 1914*)

On the night of September 4/5 the enemy shelled the place with a mixture of high explosive and gas – a new one. It was mustard gas, a blistering agent, which may take a while for its effects to become apparent. Thus... *It was not until the next morning, that the men felt the serious effects of the Gas which was still hanging around the dugouts and in their clothes. The gas smelt very much like mustard and causes the men to vomit, with swellings which made some practically blind.*

*For days afterwards men who at the time were not seriously effected (sic), were being evacuated, as the gas when once in the system, gradually got the upper hand causing the man to become seriously ill...approximately 120 casualties.* (Excerpt from the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion War Diary entry of the night of September 4-5, 1917)

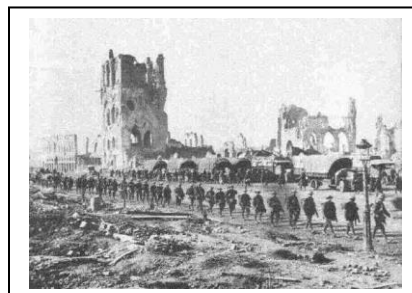
The Canadian-led campaign of the summer in the Canadian-held sectors had apparently been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good its by-then exorbitant losses. The Australians – further to the south than the Canadians - and then the Canadians themselves were ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadian Corps was obliged to abandon its plans.

There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the Lens-Béthune sectors and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area. On most days, according to the Battalion War Diary, it was the artillery which fought it out – but, of course, the infantry was usually the target.

Even though it was known that the Canadian Corps would be transferred north into Belgium, there was to be an interlude of several weeks before it was eventually despatched to that next theatre of operations.

During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches was still the rule - with several exceptions when the unit was retired to areas behind the lines, particularly for training - although it was apparent from the War Diary entries of several units that sports were being considered more and more to be a morale booster among the troops.

In the middle of that October of 1917 the troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion were ordered north into Belgium and once more to the *Ypres Salient* which the unit had left some thirteen months before. Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the last day of that July – was to come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – at least was latterly *ostensibly* claimed to have been - one of the British Army's main objectives.



**(Preceding page: *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*)**

In the course of final instructions issued on October 10 while the troops were still in training, the following caveat, sent presumably from High Command, was recorded in the War Diary: *The Battalion is warned to assume a mobile condition (on “Somme” conditions, Brigade said). Mobile, of course, was not an adjective to describe Passchendaele, and then to compare it to the Somme was surely not the means to instil a feeling of any great confidence in anyone.*



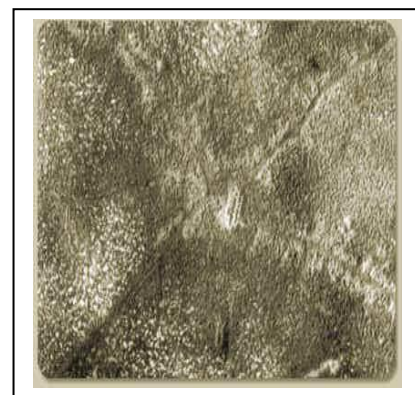
**(Right above: *Somewhere, possibly anywhere or almost everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)**

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered 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 spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



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

There may have been more than a little apprehension in certain quarters before the attack as evidenced by the following entry into Appendix Number 26 of the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary *a propos* the undertaking: *This operation had been undertaken already by other troops, but, owing to the strength of the position and the state of the ground, the attack had failed.*



The operation was no less than the taking of the village of Passchendaele in four stages, the first two to be undertaken by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions, the final two by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions.

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

In the meantime, the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion had begun its transfer back to Belgium on October 15. Marching from Cambligneul at different hours of the day to the railway-station at Savy, the different units of the Battalion there had boarded trains\* which were to carry them north to the town of Cæstre near to which they were to be billeted for the next six days.

***\*In this regard the Battalion had been fortunate: most of the Canadian units made this first leg of the transfer on foot.***

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

On October 21, at one-thirty in the morning, the personnel of Private Russell's Battalion then departed from their quarters – which they had almost unanimously found comfortable, attractive and clean – back to the railway-station at Cæstre.



The train – which was four hours late – then took a further three-and-a-half to reach Ypres. Apparently, such had been the damage done to the city during the previous year that many of those who had served there in 1916 found it hard to recognize.

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



Upon de-training, the officers and soldiers of the unit marched across the remnants of the place in a north-easterly direction – likely through the city centre and past the vestiges of the *Cloth Hall* as seen in a photograph on a preceding page - to the vicinity of the village of *Wieltje*... *where they were shown a field by an officer of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade, under whose orders the Battalion was placed, and ordered to remain there until accommodation could be found.*



***They were moved, some in a tunnel at WIETJE, some in tents, some in bivouacs, about 4.00 p.m. for the night. Just at dark an enemy plane flew over the neighbouring lines, dropped bombs... (Excerpt from War Diary entry of October 21, 1917) ...and caused three casualties.***

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

After four days spent in and near *Wieltje*, the unit moved to the forward area where it relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> CMR Battalion in the front lines on October 25. There it received orders of an assault to be undertaken on the morrow; thus, during that night, all four of the Mounted Rifle Battalions moved up to their assembly positions.



***(continued)***

The attack of October 26 was the first of three to be undertaken by troops of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade before the end of the month, although the 4<sup>th</sup> CMR Battalion was in reserve, and thus little engaged on one of those three occasions. Nevertheless, the unit's casualty numbers for that period were not light: seventy-one *killed in action*; two-hundred two *wounded*; eighteen *missing in action*.

(Preceding page: *A part of Tyne Cot cemetery, perhaps at a distance of a kilometre from Passchendaele (today Passendale) – the cross stands atop a German bunker. Apart from the twelve-thousand graves therein, of which more than eight-thousand are of unidentified soldiers, there are some thirty-five thousand names engraved in stone panels of those who died but have no known grave: There was insufficient space for them to be commemorated on the Menin Gate. – photograph from 2011(?)*)

(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*)



The son of William John Russell, gas-work labourer, and of Emma Louisa Rapley Russell of 56, Clarence Road, Sutton, Surrey, England, he was also husband to Elizabeth Mary Russell (née *Smith*)\*.

*\*She was the daughter of George Smith and of Alfreda Smith (née Osbourne) of Bishop's Cove, Upper Island Cove, Newfoundland. It is likely that William and Elizabeth met in Grey County Ontario, for they married in Owen Sound on March 30, 1916, after his enlistment. On September 4 of 1916 he willed his everything to her and in the following year, as of April 1, he allotted a monthly twenty dollars to her from his pay.*

*Elizabeth Mary Russell, after her husband's demise, subsequently returned to Bishop's Cove and became a Mrs. Lundrigan.*

William Thomas Russell was the oldest of four siblings: Sidney-Caleb, Percy-John and Edith-Caroline remained in England.

Private Russell was reported as having been *killed in action* during an...*attack east of the village of Passchendaele...on October 26, 1917.*

He had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-five years: date of birth at Sutton, Surrey, England, September 18, 1890.

Private William Thomas Russell was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).





**The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to *criceadam@yahoo.ca*. Last updated – January 23, 2023.**