



Battery Sergeant Major John Ryan, (Number 441572) of the 4th Battalion of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is buried in Rosières Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference, III.A.18..

(Right: The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps is from the canadiansoldiers.com Web-site.)



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *labourer*, John Ryan has left little if any documentation behind him a *propos* his move from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. All that may be said with certainty is that he was residing in or near to the city of Saskatoon in June of 1915 – for that is where and when he enlisted.

It was there on the twenty-sixth day of that month, his first pay-records amongst other papers providing the evidence, that John Ryan presented himself for enlistment. He underwent a medical examination on that same day – a procedure which found him as...*for the Over-Seas Canadian Expeditionary Force* - as well as attestation, thereupon to be immediately *taken on strength* by the 53rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

However, a further six weeks were now to pass before the formalities of his enlistment were brought to an official conclusion when, on August 8, the commanding officer of the 53rd Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel R.M. Dennistoun, declared – *on paper* – that *...John Ryan...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

By May 20 of 1915, the 53rd Battalion had been transferred for training to *Camp Sewell* (later re-named *Camp Hughes*) in Manitoba, a tented affair with a capacity for some twenty-seven thousand personnel. There Private Ryan remained for a further ten months with his Battalion before, at the end of March, 1916, the unit departed for *overseas service* .

Strange as it may appear, two drafts from the 53rd Battalion had left Canada before had the parent unit which did not finally sail until that March of 1916, some seven months after their departure. This was to happen, in fact, because the Canadian formations already overseas were in need of re-enforcements to bring their numbers up to strength. Even when the 53rd Battalion eventually reached the United Kingdom it was not to be sent into *active service* as a single unit but rather was used to supply other units with personnel. It was to finally be disbanded in 1917 having never fired a shot in anger*.

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

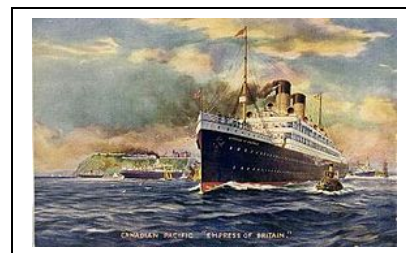
However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that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

Private Ryan's unit was to cross more than half the North-American continent by train in the second half of March, 1916, to reach the east-coast port of Halifax. There, on or about the twenty-ninth day of the month, it embarked onto the requisitioned *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company's* vessel, *Empress of Britain*, for the Atlantic crossing.

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The 53rd Battalion was not to travel alone: also taking passage to the United Kingdom on board ship were the 74th and 75th Battalions of Canadian Infantry and the 7th Draft of B Section of the Number 1 Canadian Field Ambulance.

The *Empress* was one of a three-ship troop convoy which also included *Baltic* and *Adriatic*, the ensemble to be escorted by the venerable Royal Navy cruiser, *Carnarvon*. Having sailed from Halifax on April 1, the ships were to dock in the English west-coast port of Liverpool nine days later, on April 9



(Right: *The image of the Empress of Britain – this the one launched in 1906 – is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

From Liverpool the 53rd Battalion was transported by train southwards, to the newly-established Canadian military complex in the English county of Hampshire, a camp in the vicinity of the two villages of Liphook and Bramshott to which the second-named community had by that time lent its name.



(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

Hardly two months following his arrival at *Camp Bramshott*, on June 3, Private Ryan was hospitalized - likely after a preliminary examination at *Bramshott Military Hospital* - at *Connaught Military Hospital* at the nearby British Army encampment at Aldershot.

Not all that long prior to this date - the details are not clear - Private Ryan had spent some time in London in the *Borough of Lambeth*. He likely had travelled from *Camp Bramshott* to the London railway terminal of *Waterloo* and thereabouts had found the companionship of a young lady. It had been this encounter which was later to see him in *Connaught Military Hospital**.

**Of no consolation to Private Reid, of course, would have been the knowledge the Borough of Lambeth is where the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury is located.*

Private Ryan was to pass the next seventeen days at *Connaught* receiving treatment for his venereal complaint. It was on June 19 that he was discharged from there back to duty with his unit at *Bramshott*.

Back to duty though now he was, the saga of Private Ryan's enforced absence was not over: for him, as for many others in the British and Commonwealth Forces, there was now a financial price to pay.

Venereal disease was frowned upon by certain sectors of the public, thus by certain politicians and thus by the military hierarchy. Therefore there existed a policy that hospitalized soldiers be deprived of a percentage of their already meagre pay - and of the entirety - of any allowances to compensate for the medical attention received*.

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**It is apparently true to say officers were often favoured as their diagnoses at times were submitted as NYD (Not Yet Determined) or PUO (Pain of Undetermined Origin). Thus both financial retribution and social stigma were often avoided.*

(Excerpt from a service-record card of Private Ryan) Stoppages: 1/6/16 – 19/6/16 19 days @ 50 cents per diem and forfeits 19 days allowance

On July 3, 1916, Private Ryan was transferred from the 53rd Battalion - which was now to remain in the United Kingdom until its dissolution in December of 1917 – to the 54th Battalion (*Kootenay*) of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade which by that time had been designated to serve in the newly-forming 4th Canadian Division, this force to be transferred to France in August, just weeks hence. That move, however, was not to come about immediately: it was to be six weeks less a day before Private Ryan was on his way to *active service* on the Continent.

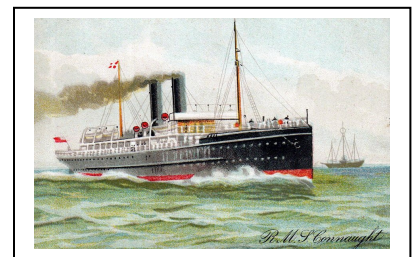
The elements of the Canadian 4th Division* were by this time massing in the United Kingdom. The Division was to be short of its own artillery, this for the most part to be provided by Royal Artillery units; however, three new Canadian Infantry Brigades comprising twelve battalions of Canadian infantry were about to be transported cross-Channel.

**There would also be a 5th Canadian Division, but this formation was to remain in England to serve for training purposes and to act as a re-enforcement pool. It as an entity was never to see active service during the conflict.*

The 54th Battalion was despatched from *Camp Bramshott* on August 13 to duty on the Continent: (Extract from 54th Battalion War Diary for August 13, 1916) *Entrained at Liphook for Southampton in two trains Officers 20 O.R. 504 in 1st Train, Off 16 O.R. 504 in 2nd Train. Arrived Southampton 1.30 & 3.30 p.m. ...4 Officers and 111 O.R. detailed to accompany Transport & Baggage on S.S “Archimedes”. Balance of Battalion embarked on S.S. “Connaught”.*

Neither on which train, nor in which party, nor on which transport ship Private Ryan travelled appears to have been documented.

(Right: The image of the Royal Mail Ship Connaught, on which the majority of 54th Battalion personnel traversed the English Channel en route to active service on the Continent, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Connaught, only months later, while returning from Le Havre to Southampton on March 3, 1917, was torpedoed and sunk.)



In the early hours of the next day, August 14, “Connaught” arrived in the port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine – “Archimedes” was to do so two days later. The personnel thereupon to march to the *Number 2 Rest Camp*, there to pass the remainder of that day before on the next undergoing a gas drill, a short route march, and the preliminaries to the train journey northwards to Belgium.

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Private Ryan and his fellow soldiers were to entrain late on that evening of August 15, were to travel overnight and would finally arrive in Belgium close to their destination on the evening of August 17. After four further days of shuffling about, the 54th Battalion eventually found itself at *Chippewa Camp*, on the road between the two rear-area communities of La Clytte and Reninghelst.

(Right: *Looking beyond the grave-stones of La Clytte Military Cemetery and towards the village of Reninghelst, Belgian countryside on which the units – including the 54th Battalion of the Canadian 4th Division - were stationed after mid-August of 1916 – photograph from 2017*)



As the 4th Canadian Division was taking its place in the trenches of unoccupied Belgium, the 1st Canadian Division – to be followed each in its turn by the 2nd and then the 3rd Divisions – was leaving the area for a period of training in northern France before then being ordered south into the area of the ongoing British summer and autumn offensive of that 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme*.

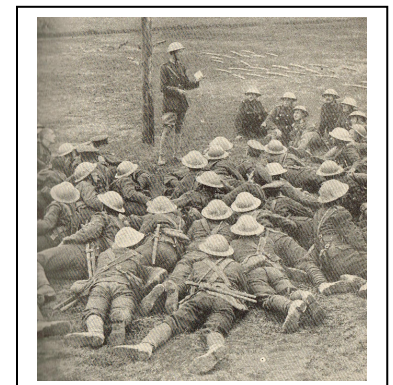
The *First Battle of the Somme* had by that September been ongoing for some two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On the 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 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

As the campaign had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on and about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

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

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



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During the intervening period, having been posted in August into the *St-Éloi Sector* to the south of the city of Ypres, the 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion had remained in the area for a month until September 20 when it had begun a three-day march to the aforementioned training area assigned to it - for Private Ryan's unit some fifteen kilometres distant from the major centre of St-Omer.

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



The training period had lasted for two weeks less a day, until the third day of October when the Battalion entrained at the station in Audruicq for an over-night journey to the town of Doullens, to the west of the battlefields of *the Somme*.

And it was on the day just prior to the 54th Battalion's transfer from the training area to *the Somme* that Private Ryan received a first promotion, to the rank of lance corporal and put up his first stripe.

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



There were then to be six days of marching before the 54th Battalion, on October 10, arrived in the forward area of *the Somme*, at the *Brickfields Camp (la Briqueterie)* in the vicinity of Albert, and four days later again before it found its way into the trenches at Courcelette.

There was little infantry action recorded during this last half of October; yet even so, during the thirteen days spent in the area of the front-line trenches, the 54th Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-three *killed in action* and one-hundred forty-eight *wounded*, due mostly to enemy gun-fire.

(Right: *The village of Courcelette seen from the north just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)



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



The 54th Battalion remained at *the Somme* - with again little if any infantry action undertaken by lance-corporal Ryan's unit - until November 25 when it turned its back on the place.

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At first westward, then north, passing to the western side of Arras and beyond to the north-west, on December 4 the Battalion reached the commune of Ourton. By then the unit had spent some ten days on foot to cover the eighty-kilometre itinerary.

Lance Corporal Ryan and the 54th Battalion were still behind the forward area at Ourton eight days later, on December 12. Several new officers and eleven other ranks arrived to bolster the numbers of the unit on that day and two Military Medals were presented, to a company sergeant major and to a private; and Lance Corporal Ryan was awarded his second stripe and the accompanying rank of corporal – to fill the void of a Corporal Sheehan who himself had been further promoted.

It would be in the same general area, in the forward sectors in the vicinity of the mining centre of Lens, some twenty or so kilometres to the east of Ourton, that the Battalion was to operate for the winter months, submitting to all those rigours, routines and perils of life in – and out of - the trenches*.



(Right: *This is what was to become of Lens before the Great War ended – from a vintage post-card*)

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



During those final days of the autumn of 1916 and the winter months which followed, there was little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind: the troops who were ordered to carry them out, in general loathed these operations.

Casualties were, overall, light; even while posted in the forward areas the Canadian War Diarists were often able to record...*Casualties – nil*. During this entire period the medical services were much more occupied with cases of sickness and the need for dental work than they were with the victims of military activity.

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

Christmas of 1916 for the majority of the 54th Battalion personnel was just another day of a tour in the trenches from which the unit was relieved on December 28 and, as New Year's Eve was not at the time celebrated to the extent that it is today, a century later – except by Scottish formations feting the *Hogmanay* – the remainder of December was relatively routine.



Corporal Ryan's *Active Service Form* - on which the originally inscribed date of May 2-3 is cited as the day on which he was *struck off strength* by the 54th Battalion and *taken on strength* by the nascent 16th (Canadian) Machine Gun Company* – has been amended to show that New Year's Day, 1917, as having been the day. It all remains somewhat unclear.

**A further document has his transfer occurring during the month of March.*

A week later, on January 8, he was sent to a Divisional machine-gun course which was to last for thirty-one days. The 16th Machine Gun Company on that January 8 was in temporary quarters at Maisnil-Bouché but when exactly Corporal Ryan reported there is not certain. However, only a week later, on January 15...*The whole Company moved to Billets in FLORINGHEM for training at CANADIAN CORPS MACHINE GUN SCHOOL.* (16th Machine-Gun Company War Diary entry for January 15, 1917)

**His own personal dossier also records two subsequent dates a propos Corporal Ryan – return to unit on February 8; struck off strength to be sent to the 16th Machine Gun Company on May 3 – which of course are of no relevance if Corporal Ryan had indeed, by then, already been transferred on January 1 to his new machine-gun unit.*

* * * * *

By August of 1916 the Canadian Army was beginning to realise the potential of the machine-gun as a weapon, and also to explore the means of exploiting it. To the newly-organized Machine Gun Companies of that 1916 – one attached to each infantry brigade – was now in 1917 to be added a total of four *more* Companies, numbered from 13 to 16 – one of them attached to each Division; thus now each of the four Canadian Divisions was to have four machine-gun companies*.



**Each British and Commonwealth Division comprised three infantry brigade.*

(Right above: *Canadian machine-gun troops becoming familiar with their new Vickers weapons in the spring of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

In the case of the 4th Canadian Division this new addition was to be the 16th Canadian Machine-Gun Company*. Not long afterwards, out of this further re-organization, the Canadian Machine Gun Corps was to be *officially* born, during the month of April, 1917.

Perhaps *more* officially, on September 1 of 1917*, the 10th, 11th and 12th Canadian Machine Gun Companies were detached from the 10th, 11th and 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4th Canadian Division and, together with the 16th CMGC, were formed into a separate unit, the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, to be Corporal (later *Sergeant*) Ryan's eventual parent unit.

**This information from the 12th CMGC and 16th Company War Diaries. The Diary of the 10th CMGC does not mention this transfer at all in its pages, and the journal of the 11th CMGC is not – as of 2017 - available on line. All three available War Diaries conclude on March 31, 1918, as further re-organization took place.*

The newly-formed 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, while active since at least that September 1 of 1917, appears not to have begun to document its official history – its War Diary - until January 1 of 1918.

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In the meantime, by January 15, as has already been seen, recruits to this new formation were being attached to the Canadian Corps Machine-Gun School at Floringhem, well behind the forward area to the north-west of Arras. On February 23, after an inspection by the Canadian Corps Commander, Sir Julian Byng, the School at Floringhem was closed and the 16th Canadian MGC was moved to Divion, perhaps eight kilometres to the south-east, and then on the last day of that month, back to Maisnil-Bouché, for *Advanced Training*.

These exercises continued there and then, as of March 7 until the end of that month, at the Bois de Bouvigny (*Bouvigny Wood(s)*) at which time the newly-formed and newly-organized machine-gunners were sent forward to the front area to experience *conditions under fire**... and to prepare for upcoming events.

**Necessary since some of these men were, of course, novices to active service.*

On April 9 of 1917 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 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.

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

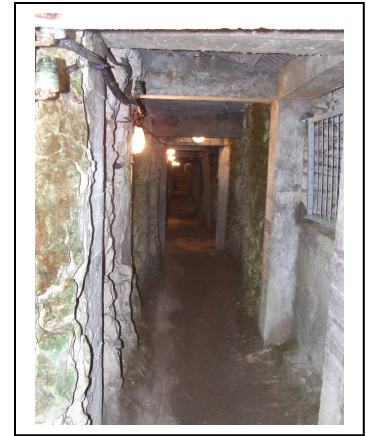


(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

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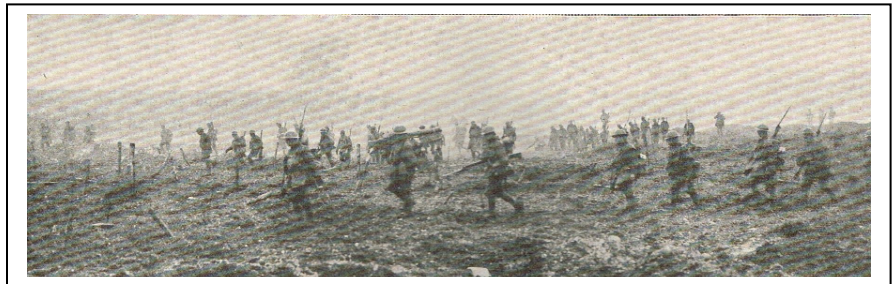
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – and with British troops under its command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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



(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd 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*)

Corporal Ryan's 16th Machine Gun Company remained based in the area of the Bois de Bouvigny during the days of the training and the preparation preceding - but also even during and then after - the attack of April 9*.



**In fact, the unit was to remain based there, according to the War Diary, until September 2 of that same year.*

Excerpts from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 9, 1917: *The whole six guns and all four sections of the company took part in VIMY RIDGE OPERATION.*

Fire was opened at Zero hour, 5.30 A.M. on Targets indicated and carried on according to Fire Schedule for the Operations.

The night firing target was altered to conform to the position reached by our Troops during the day of the 9th. This position corresponded roughly with the intermediate objective and No. 6 BARRAGE was fired as night-firing operation during night of 9th-10th.

Excerpts from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 10, 1917: *At dawn on APRIL 10th 2 Guns...were moved up to No. 2 CRATER to support the fire of the 12th C.M.G. Coy. The FINAL OBJECTIVE having been reached on this afternoon. Firing was carried on night of 10th-11th according to OPERATION FIRE SCHEDULE.*



Excerpts from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 11, 1917: *Other 2 Guns moved into CRATER position – 1 O.R. wounded*

(Preceding page: Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration)

Excerpts from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 12, 1917: All 16 Guns of the COMPANY took part in the capture of THE PIMPLE in conjunction with the 10th CDN. INF. BRIGADE...12 in number fired on night-firing targets for this operation. The 4 CRATER Guns fired on enemy strong point and enfiladed enemy trench...commencing at Zero hour 5. A.M. The Guns fired 1 Belt every 5 minutes, continuing fire for 1 hour...



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

Excerpts from the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for April 13, 1917: Guns...fired on Night-firing targets from 4.30 to 5.30 A.M. This operation took place on account of a suspected enemy counter-attack. The CRATER guns opened fire but were immediately compelled by heavy shell fire to cease fire...

On the following day, April 14, the entire Company was withdrawn. Total casualties incurred by the 16th CMG Company during the five days of the entire operation had amounted to that single wounded other rank.

The following excerpt is taken from the War Diary of the Canadian 4th Division and it allows a further general idea of the role of the Machine Gun Companies during the days prior to the *Battle of Arras* when many raids by Canadian forces occurred, as well as, of course, an overview of the services which they rendered on the opening days of the offensive when the Canadians took *Vimy Ridge*.

The machine guns of the Division had an average of 32 guns in action each night, supplemented upon raid nights by up to as many as 90 guns by borrowing from other Divisions, Cavalry Machine Gun Squadrons and Motor batteries. They fired, on an average 15,000 rounds a night, spread over the whole German rear area, communications and overland tracks. Each raid was supported by a machine-gun barrage creeping forward 100 yards in front of the Field Artillery barrage, and proved very effective in catching troops moving out of the dug-outs after an assault.

During the actual assault, the machine-gun barrage was formed by 56 guns and 24 guns were sent forward to the forward area when the positions were being consolidated. The expenditure of ammunition was great, but, the machine-gun barrage served to isolate the position attacked and prevent any counter-attacks. Each gun emplacement was stocked with 30,000 rounds of ammunition.



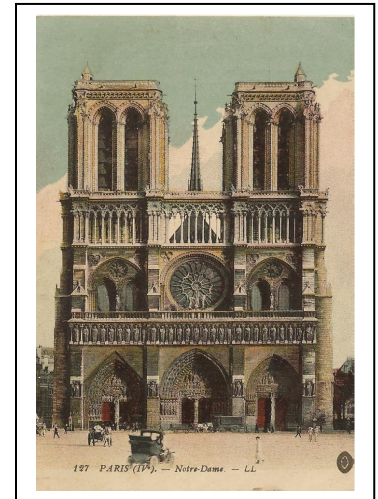
(Preceding page: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917* – from *Le Miroir*)

Once the five-week *Battle of Arras* had drawn to its conclusion in mid-May, the Canadian forces tended to be concentrated to the north of their recent theatre of operations. This area – more or less situated from Arras in the south to Béthune in the north – was soon to be the scene of more offensive action by the Canadian Corps, mainly in the region around the mining-centre of Lens. But for now the Corps was to rest.

The period of June and July was, for the most part, relatively placid and the majority of the Canadian units were to spend several weeks in positions well to the rear of the trenches.

This thus being a time of re-organization, re-enforcement and, at times, recreation, there was an opportunity for *furlough* to be granted. For some this was to be a return to the United Kingdom but for Corporal Ryan the allotment was to be ten days leave in Paris, from July 20 of that 1917 until – inclusive – the last day of the same month.

(Right: *Notre-Dame de Paris in or before the year 1916* – from a vintage post-card)



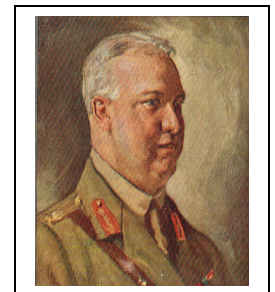
It was also during these days, while Corporal Ryan was encountering the delights of the French capital, that he was the recipient of a third promotion, this one perhaps a bit of a two-edged sword. On July 24 he became an *acting* sergeant with all the responsibilities of that rank but – as was often the case with an *acting* appointment – without financial remuneration: in other words, *without pay*.

He returned to a Canadian Corps of which the 1st and 2nd Divisions – but not his 4th Canadian Division – were soon to be busy. The summer campaign, having been postponed for some weeks was now to go ahead in August, one of the primary objectives to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

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



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 area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.



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

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

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

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

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



However, as the 12th Brigade War Diarist entered on August 17, two days after the major attack on *Hill 70*... *This is the first time since the arrival of the Brigade in FRANCE that it has been holding the line next to a big operation in which it has had no active part. The role of the Brigade has been to draw as much attention as possible to its area by means of digging trenches and cutting wire to distract the enemy's attention from the theatre of operations North of the River (the River Souchez).*



The 12th Brigade War Diarist, apparently documenting the operation as seen from the point of view of the infantry battalions of his unit, overlooked the role that the machine-gun companies attached to his Brigade were now to be ordered to play*.

The Diarist was right, of course, that it had been the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions responsible for this operation. However, the 16th CMG Company War Diary entry for that August 15 recorded that...*All guns took part in 1st & 2nd CDN. DIV. operation, morning of 15th inst.*

**It is to be remembered that the 16th CMG Company was at the time attached to the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade which was a component of the 4th Canadian Division.*

Firing positions had been dug and constructed as early as a week prior to the attack although some of the guns had not been *in situ*, laid or ready to fire, until noon of August 14. From the time of the first barrage fired at twenty-five minutes past four on the following morning until mid-night of August 17-18, there were to be numerous calls from the infantry for intensive fire, several changes of targets dependent on the multiple attacks and counter-attacks made by both sides, as well a continuous rate of slow fire on pre-set targets.

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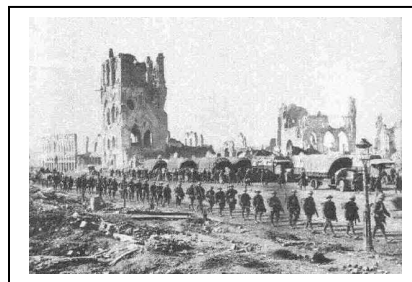
Less than forty-eight hours later, on August 19, Sergeant Ryan's Company was ordered into support of 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade operations until August 26 when it was then allotted the same role with the 11th CIB. On the following day, August 27, the unit then occupied defensive positions and settled into its habitual forward-area routine.

On August 30 Sergeant Ryan was ordered to a further machine-gun course at the training centre in the vicinity of the coastal town of Camiers. From there he was to return *to duty* with his unit on September 28.

It would appear from some sources that the Canadians had expected, and had even planned, further action during that late summer in the area of Lens, but the ongoing *Battle of Passchendaele* further north in Belgium was not proceeding according to expectations and the British were running out of re-enforcements. The Canadians – and the Anzacs - were to be asked to provide the necessary man-power.

As seen some pages above, on September 1 of 1917* the 10th, 11th and 12th Canadian Machine Gun Companies had been detached from the 10th, 11th and 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4th Canadian Division and, together with the 16th CMGC, had been formed into a separate unit, the 4th Canadian Divisional Machine Gun Battalion, now to be an autonomous force under the direct command of the 4th Canadian Division.

It was to be in the middle of October that the Canadians were ordered north into Belgium and to the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the end of that July - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.



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

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

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

It had also been on September 27 that his rank of sergeant was confirmed; from this day on, Sergeant Ryan was to receive one dollar and thirty-five cents per diem plus a daily fifteen cents field allowance*

**As a corporal and acting sergeant he had earned one dollar ten cents per day plus ten cents field allowance.*

(continued)

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



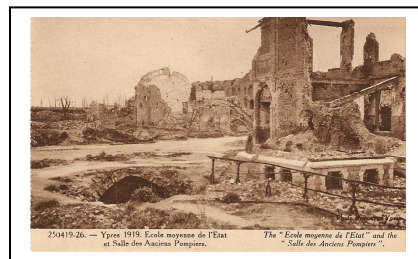
(Right below: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)



It was on October 12 that the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company began to move out of the sectors that the Canadians had occupied since *First Somme* and commenced moving northwards towards - and then into - Belgium.

Sergeant Ryan's Company first overnighted in Ham-en-Artois before moving on to the community of Hondeghem. There they occupied a rest camp for some eight days, during which period there was physical training each morning plus a route march undertaken each and every afternoon.

On October 22 the unit moved into Belgium: by bus from Hondeghem to the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres; and then across the rubble to the north-eastern part of *the Salient* to Potijze for a brief stop before advancing into the forward area later on that same day.



(Right: *Ypres: The remains of a college and a fire-station in 1919, just after the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

By the late evening of October 23 the guns and gunners of Sergeant Ryan's unit had resumed the practice of night-firing: apart from rendering the supply and re-enforcement of his units that much more difficult, it also obliged the Germans to remain alert and awake at night. On the other hand, visits by German aircraft had the same effect on the Canadians endeavouring to catch a few moments of sleep.

Then on two subsequent days, October 25 and 26, the Company supported the efforts of the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade in a first minor operation before an all-day effort, a day on which the Company was firing non-stop from five in the morning until seven-fifteen, some two hours later, a period in which the unit expended some thirty-five thousand rounds.



'*Harrassing-fire*' against any and everything that moved on the German side of the line was the order of the days October 27 and 28, the latter spiced-up with supporting fire for a minor raid undertaken by the 44th Canadian Infantry Battalion.

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

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

October 29 was relatively quiet for the Company personnel in the forward area, night-firing having been the only recorded offensive action of that day.

But the next one, November 30, saw a major Canadian attack by troops of the 3rd and 4th Canadian Infantry Divisions advancing up the slope from Zonnebeke towards the village of Passchendaele.

Excerpt from 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company War Diary entry for October 30, 1918: *Zero hour...was 5.40 a.m. From 6.30 a.m. all guns in barrage positions were subjected to exceedingly heavy shell fire – 5 guns of No 4 Battery were blown up by shell-fire and all remaining guns were forced to evacuate their positions... The BLUE LINE captured...6 guns went 'over the top' with Battalions & took up defensive positions in Front & Support Lines...*

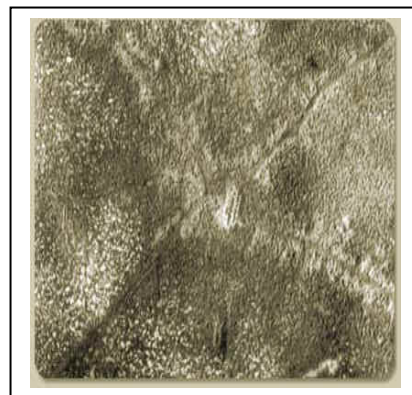
From this point on, the primary Canadian role in the *Third Battle of Ypres* was taken from the metaphoric shoulders of the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions and placed on those of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions. But whereas the *infantry* of the two former Divisions was soon to be leaving *the Salient* for a return to France, the machine-guns – and the artillery – was to remain.

There was to be a six-day period, from November 4 to 10, during which Sergeant Ryan's unit would re-organize and rest in the area of the northern French town of Cæstre, a period after which it returned *to duty* based at Potijze. From there it relieved and supported minor operations by other units, but was not involved in any major offensive. On November 20 the unit was withdrawn to the rear area of Poperinghe.

(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*)

From there the 16th Canadian Machine Gun Company returned to France, by bus from Belgium to the vicinity of the French community of Merville, thence to Busnes on the morrow, from where it then moved to Diéval on the next day again, November 23. It was to remain based on Diéval until December 18.

(continued)



(Right: 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)



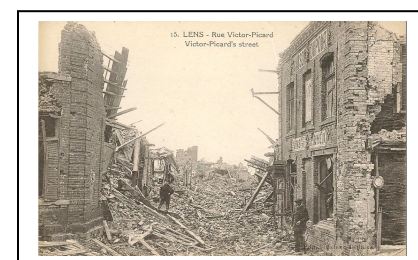
In the month of December, after the withdrawal from Belgium, Sergeant Ryan and the other personnel of the 16th CMG Company had the right to cast a vote in the Canadian General Election, polling booths having been opened for Canadian Forces from December 4 to 17 for that purpose.

Sergeant Ryan voted on December 10. Apparently there was only a single soldier in his unit who chose not to do so: *He had brothers fighting, 1 brother killed and another wounded. He did not wish (he said) to vote against Conscription, nor did he wish to be instrumental in forcing his only remaining brother in Canada to enlist.* (Excerpt from 16th CMG Company War Diary entry for December 10, 1917)

On January 1 of the New Year, 1918, the War Diary of the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion was to come into being. As the 16th CMG Company was a unit of the Battalion, and as the War Diary of the same 16th CMG Company was to close at the end of March, in three months' time, it is the history of the 4th CMG Battalion which will hereafter recount the remainder of Sergeant Ryan's war-time career.

At the conclusion of the daily entries for January of 1918, the War Diarist for the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion - at the time in the areas of Lens, adjacent Liévin and Carency, some five kilometres to the south-west - made the following resume of the month under the title...*General: Apart from manning forward and support m/g/ emplacements and carrying out harassing fire the efforts of the Battalion were devoted to organizing and completing a strong m/g/ defensive scheme which involved after a thorough reconnaissance, the construction of new m/g e s (emplacements?) and dugouts, and to the establishing of SAA (small arms ammunition), ration, water and supply dumps...*

...On account of the enemy bombing from aircraft – and in anticipation of bombing from the air becoming more prevalent and persistent, orders were issued for the erection of mud walls around huts and transport lines...



(Right: A suburb of the city and mining-centre of Lens at some time towards the end of – or just subsequent to – the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

During that month there had been but six casualties: three *other ranks* wounded and three *other ranks* gassed. If anything - the Battalion still posted to the same areas until the middle of the month when all four Companies retired to *Marqueffles Farm* and began training - the month of February proved to be even quieter, with only three *other ranks* reported as having been wounded.

(continued)

Sergeant Ryan, however, was to spend half of that month of February, 1918, away from his unit; he had been granted a further period of leave, on this second occasion for fourteen days – plus two more for travel – back to the United Kingdom. Where exactly he was to travel has not been recorded but, for those with no family there, the destination was usually London. He returned *to duty* on February 14 with the Battalion in the area of Lens, Liévin and Carency and then to *Marqueffles Farm*.

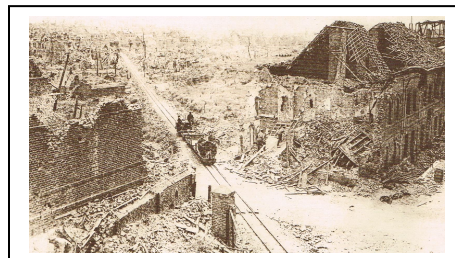
After a period withdrawn to the rear, by March 11 the 4th CMG Battalion had returned to that forward sector, specifically to Carency, to Lens, and to St-Émile, a mining district in the northern outskirts of Lens and not far distant from *Hill 70* which the Canadians had attacked and captured in August of 1917 – and with which Sergeant Ryan was already well acquainted.

On this occasion St-Émile was to be a great deal calmer than it had been those several months earlier: however, the artillery of both sides was still spasmodically active; there were preparations underway for a raid; enemy aircraft were to make several appearances; and night-firing on pre-set targets, usually enemy supply routes, was a routine on which some twenty-five to thirty-thousand rounds per diem were expended.

This activity in the forward area continued well into March...and then the first day of the spring of 1918 arrived.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the enemy 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 War, the Germans launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – in the sector where the 85th Battalion was serving - in March of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)



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 serving there, particularly in the area of the juncture with the French Army.

The German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was to be the result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were to be 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 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*



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

In the meantime, several days passed before news of the German success filtered down to many Canadian units. In the case of the 4th CMG Battalion it was just two days before the first revelation that all was not as well as might be wished for. On March 23...*All leave stopped...and there was an unusual shuffling of the 4th Battalion Machine Gun Companies in the Loos Sector - and of the Canadian Machine Gun Battalions elsewhere.*



Two days later again...*All ranks return from Courses of instruction and all detached men except those on leave return to Battalion.* (From War Diary entry of March 25, 1918)

(Right above: *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*)

At this time many Canadian units were being prepared for either a possible move southward towards the theatre of battle, or for a German attack anticipated in the area of Arras, this being the northernmost sector to be involved in the enemy offensive. Certainly at times the increased enemy artillery activity lent itself to that belief.

To that end the 4th CMG Battalion found itself transferred to the south-west, to the area of Écurie and Mont St-Éloi, being ordered posted into four locales within two days* before being re-organized**. Three Batteries of each of the 1st (new) Company and of the 2nd (new) Company of the Battalion were then sent to the forward area in the *Gavrelle Sector* to relieve a British machine-gun unit. One Battery from each (new) Company remained for the moment in reserve in the area of Écurie.

**This was not an unusual happening at the time: units were posted hither and thither, some marching in circles for several days as commands and counter-commands were issued in short order.*

***The four Companies of the 4th CMG Battalion were now reorganized into two larger Companies: the original Companies numbered 10 and 16 now formed the new Number 1 Company and the original Companies Numbered 11 and 12 became the new Number 2 Company. Each of these new companies was divided into four Batteries (sub-divided into two Half-Batteries) of twelve guns each.*



(Right above and page following: *The village of Mont St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partly destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. The community is not to be confused with St-Éloi in Belgium.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)

By this time, the end of March and beginning of April, the Germans were still very much on the offensive on *the Somme*, and were to remain thus for a further month. Nevertheless, the situation in the south was beginning to stabilize and the Canadian units were to remain where they were*.



**Of course, the attack in the north of France and in Belgium was yet to fall upon the soldiery stationed there.*

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

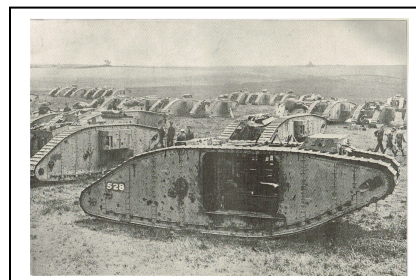


The Canadian Machine Gun Battalions were also now about to increase their fire-power. A directive of or from about April 18, 1918, decreed that: *Canadian Machine Gun Battalions are to be increased by a 3rd. Company of 32 guns and the necessary personnel...*

And then, towards the end of April, the German offensive having been contained, the Allies – their High Command now unified under Foch – and the newly-arriving American divisions were now to contemplate an offensive of their own. In the meantime, all was relatively quiet as both sides rested, re-enforced and re-organized.

The 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion War Diary records that the unit remained in the sectors to the north of Arras and surrounding Lens until the final day of July, by which time, Sergeant Ryan had become Battery Sergeant Major – with pay – on June 21.

Apart from some exercises with Australian troops and their tanks, there appears to have been little other than the daily routine to be documented.



(Right: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'. – from Illustration*)

However, on the first day of August all that changed for the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, as it was to change at that time for just about every Canadian battalion. The entire Canadian Corps was to move south in a sweeping semi-circular motion around to the west of the city of Amiens, then to turn eastward again to face the Germans on the ground where *Operation Michael* had been brought to a halt some four months before.

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



(continued)

This was all to be done without the enemy's knowledge; thus the move was accomplished within a period of less than two weeks and by moving on foot and by night. When the attack went in on the morning of August 8 it was obvious that it had come as a complete surprise to the Germans.

At twenty minutes past four – zero hour - on that morning, the 4th CMG Battalion began its move forward in support of the 10th, 11th and 12th Battalions of Canadian Infantry, some of the personnel and their weapons being carried to their first objectives by tanks.

And this was only the beginning.

In some places the German resistance was strong and at times the enemy counter-attacked, bombed and shelled the advancing troops; but nevertheless, particularly in those sectors where tanks were employed, the advance was relentless. By the end of that first day the Canadian forces had moved forward some eleven kilometres, something almost unheard of* since the end of the summer of 1914.



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

**The first day of the Battle of Cambrai in November, 1917, and the German offensives of that spring of 1918 were perhaps the exceptions.*



(Right above: *On August 8, captured positions on the Somme being consolidated by Canadian troops against any German counter-attack – from Le Miroir*)

The Canadian 4th Division withdrew from the field on the night of August 13-14 – to be replaced by the Canadian 2nd Division - by which time about twenty kilometres had been wrested from the enemy who was, by now, abandoning much of the ground won during his offensive of that previous spring.

But by that time, alas, Battery Sergeant Major Ryan had played his role to its end.

Casualty report: *“Killed in Action” - He left the Battery Headquarters West of Vrely, at 11.00 on the morning of August 11th 1918, to proceed to the transport lines regarding rations. He started down the main communication trench and there are no details available relative to his subsequent movements., although it is believed that he met his death by shell fire when proceeding down the main street of MEHARICOURT.*

The son of James Ryan of Middle Cove, Torbay, in the District of St. John's East, Newfoundland, he appears to have left behind no further family information except that he had an uncle Richard Ryan, also a fisherman, to whom, in a Will dated July 28, 1916, he had bequeathed his all.

Battery Sergeant Major Ryan was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 11, 1918, the fourth day of the *Third Battle of Amiens*.

John Ryan had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-five years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, December 12, 1889 (from attestation papers).

Battery Sergeant Major Ryan was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 24, 2023.

