



Private Nicholas Ryan (Number 257628) of the 4th Battalion, Canadian Machine Gun Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bucquoy Road Cemetery, Ficheux: Grave reference IV.C.9.

(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 farm labourer, Nicholas Ryan appears to have left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Canada. There is a Nicholas Ryan found on the passenger list of the SS *Ivermore* for the journey of May 28, 1912, from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, the young man on his way to the industrial city of Sydney, but this is hardly enough to confirm him as the subject of this biography.

All that may be said with any certainty is that he was a resident of the province of Saskatchewan – his only given address at the time – in October of 1917, for that was where and when he was called up by means of the Canadian Military Service Act of 1917 – otherwise known as conscription.

It was in the small community of Melville that Nicholas Ryan (Military Service Number 453333*) underwent a medical examination on October 16, 1917, which found him as...*fit for dispatching overseas*. The number 2 in his given category, A2, indicates that he had undergone no prior training.

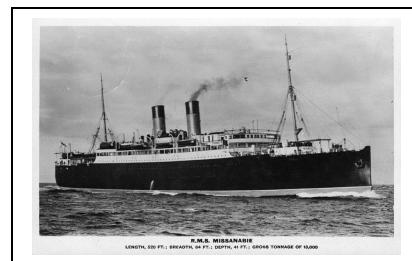
**Not to be confused with his designated Regimental Number, 257628.*

It was to be some thirteen weeks later, on January 18, that he was called up and attested in the provincial capital city, Regina, and *taken on strength* by the 1st Depot Battalion* of the Saskatchewan Regiment.

**Depot Battalions came into being in late 1917 as pools for both volunteers and conscripts since the original Canadian Overseas Battalions had departed Canada by that time. The task of the Depot Battalions was to instil only a minimum of training and discipline in these new recruits before despatching them to the Canadian Reserve Battalions in the United Kingdom where the job of training was to be completed.*

It was only just over two months later that Private Ryan's 3rd Draft of the 1st Saskatchewan Regiment sailed from Halifax to the United Kingdom, having travelled across half the continent by train only days before. The vessel was His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie*, a large ship which likely carried other units besides that of Private Ryan.

Unfortunately, no precise records appear to be available to identify these detachments, although drafts of the Alberta Regiment, of the Canadian Artillery and of the Canadian Army Medical Corps are documented as having sailed on – and as having arrived in the United Kingdom on – the same date as did *Missanabie*: however, in those cases, the ship has not been identified.



(Right above: *The photograph of Missanabie – to be torpedoed and sunk in September of 1918 - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Missanabie left Halifax on March 25 of 1918 and arrived in the United Kingdom, likely in the port of Liverpool – on April 3, nine days later.

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Following disembarkation Private Ryan and his comrades-in-arms were transferred by train to the large Canadian military complex established in the vicinity of the Hampshire villages of Liphook and Bramshott, the latter having lent its name to the camp.

Upon his arrival at *Camp Bramshott*, Private Ryan's detachment was immediately *struck off strength* from the 1st Saskatchewan Regiment and attached to the Canadian 15th Reserve Battalion, it stationed at *Bramshott*, for a period of training. In the case of Private Ryan the training was to be of short duration: nineteen days.

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



On April 23 he was transferred once more: on paper to the Canadian Machine Gun Depot and physically to the coastal area of Seaford in the county of East Sussex where the Depot was based. There, having been *taken on strength* on April 24, he was to remain for almost four months, until August 18, before he was despatched to *active service* on the Continent.



(Right above: *The community cemetery at Seaford in which are buried a number of Canadian soldiers, including two Newfoundlanders: Frederick Jacob Snelgrove and Ebenezer Tucker* – photograph from 2016)

On the morrow, August 19, he reported to the Canadian Machine Gun Corps Reinforcement Camp and there to the Canadian Machine Gun Pool. Six days later, August 25-26, Private Ryan was attached to the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion and ordered to join the unit *in the field* which he was reported as having done on August 28, 1918.

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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 the 13th to the 16th – one of them attached to each Division; thus now each of the four Canadian Divisions was to have four such 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 force, the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, Private Ryan's eventual 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 available on line. All three available War Diaries conclude on March 31, 1918, with further re-organization (see below).*

The newly-formed 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion, while active since at least that September 1 of 1917, seems not to have begun to document its history until January 1 of 1918. This is the point at which the following account of Private Ryan's eventual unit will begin.

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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.

On March 11 the 4th CMG Battalion returned to the forward area, 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.



(Right: *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*)

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

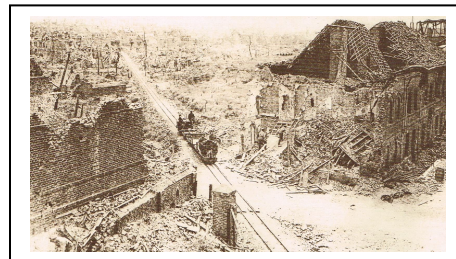
On this occasion St-Émile was to be a great deal more placid than it had been those several months earlier: the artillery of both sides was spasmodically active; there were preparations underway for a raid; enemy aircraft made several appearances; and night-firing on pre-set targets, usually enemy supply 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.

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.**



(Right: *British troops on the retreat in 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 Battalion Machine Gun Companies in the *Loos Sector* - and of the four 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: *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 right: *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, even though the Germans were still very much on the offensive on *the Somme*, and were to remain thus for a further month, and while the attack in the north of France and in Belgium was yet to fall upon the soldiery stationed there, the situation was beginning to stabilize. The Canadian units were to remain where they were.

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(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)*



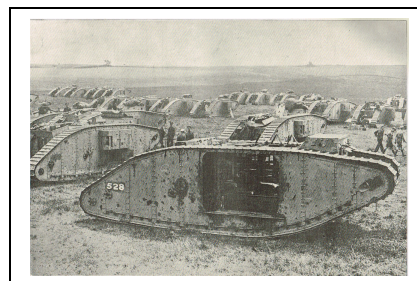
The Canadian Machine Gun Battalions were also now to increase their fire-power. A directive of or from about April 18, 1918, decreed that: *Canadian Machine Gun Battalions are to be increased by a 3rd. Company of 32 guns and the necessary personnel...*

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.

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 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(?)*)



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.

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In some places the German resistance was strong and at times the enemy counter-attacked, bombed and shelled the advancing troops; but nevertheless, 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: *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 only 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.

Just more than a week later again, the 4th Machine-Gun Battalion was being relieved by French units who were now assuming the Canadian responsibility for the continuation of the battle. The Canadians – all four divisions – were about to be transferred again, moving back whence they had come, to the *Arras Front*. They were to move back there in much the same manner in which they had arrived only those three weeks previously – by motor transport, by train and inevitably, of course, on foot – and in secret.



(Right above: *French dead commemorated in the communal cemetery at Caix: the community also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground. – photograph from 2017*)

On August 28, the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion was reaching the end of its retirement from the *Third Battle of the Somme*. An excerpt from the unit's War Diary of that day reads:

- 3.PM No 3 Company detrained at MARÇEUIL and marched to ST NICHOLAS.**
- 4.30PM No 1 Company detrained at ACQ and marched to ARRAS.**
- 8.00PM No 2 Company detrained at ACQ and moved by motor lorry to WARLUS.**
- Reinforcements – 86 other ranks arrived from C.M.G.C.R.D.**

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Where exactly he and his draft joined their new unit has not been recorded – perhaps at Hermaville where the Battalion Headquarters was to spend the night – but wherever it may have been, Private Ryan was now to report *to duty*.

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The files pertaining to Private Ryan do not inform the reader as to which Company of the 4th Canadian Machine Gun Battalion he was attached, but by the end of the following day, August 29, all three Companies of the 4th Machine-Gun Battalion had moved into a concentration area to the east of Arras.

The Canadians were about to go on the offensive once more and by the night of September 1-2 the Battalion it had had moved into its assembly areas in preparation for the advance on that next morning, an attack which had been planned to be a three-day operation.

The attack went in as scheduled on that morning of September 2. Advancing along the axis of the main Arras-Cambrai road, the 4th Canadian Division – and thus the 4th CMG Battalion – moved in the direction of the village of Dury and the nearby high ground. In places the resistance from their counterparts, the German machine-gunners, was fierce, and not all objectives were reached on that first day.



On the morning of the morrow, September 3, the attack was resumed.

(Right above: *The Canadian monument which stands in commemoration of the Battle of the Drocourt-Quéant Line and some of the ground on which the action was fought: The plinth is to be found by the side Arras-Cambrai road in the vicinity of the village of Dury. – photograph from 2016*)

(Right: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line. – from Le Miroir*)



Excerpts from the 4th CMG Battalion War Diary Appendix entry for these days: *...No opportunities for supporting fire were offered, some casualties were suffered from heavy artillery fire, during the advance.*

Owing to Machine Gun and Artillery fire it was found impossible to push...Batteries over the ridge...so these occupied positions on the west side of the ridge.

During the afternoon of the 3rd September and the night 3rd/4th September the ground gained was occupied and consolidated in depth as far back as the DROCOURT-QUEANT Support Line, these positions being maintained until being relieved...

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(Right: A German machine-gunner who also gave his all, dead at his post – from Illustration)

***The Canadian losses in these final campaigns were among the heaviest of the war: of the three-hundred thirty-seven dead interred in Dury Mill British Cemetery, only nine did not serve in a Canadian unit, and all but eighteen were to die on September 2 of 1918.**

(Right below: Dury Mill British Cemetery is to be found on the northern side of the main road from Arras to Cambrai. – photograph from 2015)

The 4th CMG Battalion was relieved over the course of September 4 and 5 and retired to the general area of Arras. The offensive was now to slow down, possibly a victim of its own success as some of the leading troops had by this time already reached the Canal du Nord. It was therefore judged by the High Command to be a propitious moment to call a halt to the advance in order to organize, to consolidate and to begin to prepare for an attack on *Bourlon Wood*.

Of course, *Bourlon Wood* lies on the eastern side of the Canal du Nord, and any such attack had to be inevitably preceded by forcing the crossing of the waterway itself. But the storming of the Canal was apparently not to be Private Ryan's Company's job.

Thus Private Ryan's unit remained in the area of Arras, in training, in re-enforcing and in organizing such things as the filling of ammunition belts with one-hundred eighty thousand rounds of .303 bullets.

It was not until three weeks after its retirement that the Battalion, on September 25, began to venture forward again. On the next day the unit's various Batteries began to report to the Battalions to which they had been attached. That same afternoon and evening, the Brigades of the 4th Canadian Division began the march to their assembly areas. The attack on the Canal du Nord was to go in on the morrow morn, September 27.

(Right above: German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai – from *Le Miroir*)

(Right above: The same area of the Canal du Nord as it is almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it – photograph from 2015)

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(Right below: *Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bournal Wood – photograph from 2016*)

Excerpt from the 4th CMG Battalion War Diary entry for September 27, 1918: *At 5,20 AM the 10th Cdn. Inf. Bde attacked with success making their objectives in good time. They were followed by the 11th and 12th Cdn. Inf. Bdes, on left and right, respectively. By the evening the whole of BOURLON WOOD had been captured. The machine guns throughout the operation finding many good targets...*



Excerpt from the 4th CMG Battalion War Diary entry for September 28, 1918: *The advance was continued by the 10th Cd Inf Bde, and reached the DOUAI-CAMBRAI Road and heavy casualties were suffered. Nos 2 and 3 Companies were with their Brigades in reserve and support respectively.*

No 1 Company engaged many targets during the advance.

(Right: *Bournal Wood Cemetery is the last resting-place of two-hundred thirty-five soldiers of the Great War of whom two-hundred twenty-one wore a Canadian uniform. – Photograph from 2017*)

During the days (day's or days'?) operations, the following casualties had been incurred - ...*17 other ranks killed, and 140 other ranks wounded. One officer was also killed and another one wounded.*



Excerpt from the 4th CMG Battalion War Diary entry for September 29, 1918: *The 12th Cdn. Inf. Bde attacked through the 10th Cdn. Inf. Bde.*

Two Batteries of No 3 Company advanced with the Infantry with 2 Batteries in Brigade Reserve. No 2 Company was in support of 12th Cdn. Inf. Bde with No 1 Company in Divisional Reserve, and re-organizing.

Excerpt from the 4th CMG Battalion War Diary entry for September 30, 1918: *11th Cd. Inf. Bde attacked. Supported by No 2 Company. Batteries being attached to the Battalions. Good targets were obtained but casualties were heavy from enemy Machine Guns. At night defensive positions were taken up. The troops suffered heavy casualties, and the machine guns were disposed to cover the gaps in the Infantry Dispositions.*

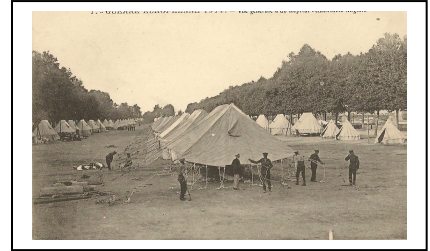
The fighting, both at the beginning and at the end of the month of September had been intense as shown by the expenditure of ammunition during that relatively short time of six days: more than three million, six-hundred thousand bullets.

On October 1, 1918, all three Companies of the Battalion were reported as serving in the line. But there is no further record of the fighting of that day, so that when exactly it was that Private Ryan was wounded is not clear.

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At some time during that period he sustained injuries to the back and to the abdomen and was eventually evacuated from the field to the 23rd Casualty Clearing Station* located in or in the vicinity of the community of Agnez-les-Duisans.

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



**The majority of sources have the 22nd CCS, but that was at Pernes, a long way from both the front and also from the cemetery in which he was buried.*

The brother of William Ryan whom he cited as his next-of-kin, and to whom he had bequeathed his everything in a second will dated May 31, 1918*, he appears to have left no further details of any other family**. William's address is documented on a single occasion as having been Melville, Saskatchewan, but more often as 55, Wordsworth Street, East Boston, Massachusetts.

**in a first will of January 18, 1918, he had left his real estate to his brother, William, and his personal belongings to Lizzie Ryan of the same address as William – presumably thus either his wife or a sister. She is not mentioned in the second testament.*

*** In the cemetery at Summerville, Bonavista Bay, there lie William Ryan (deceased in 1905 aged 74 years) and his wife Sarah (deceased October 26, 1910, aged 66 years), but there is nothing else to confirm them as the parents of Nicholas and William.*

Private Ryan was reported as having *died of wounds* in the 23rd (or 22nd, see above) Casualty Clearing Station on October 1, 1918, by its Officer Commanding.

Nicholas Ryan had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-four years and three months: date of birth at Redcliffe – possibly Redcliffe Island - Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland, July 24, 1893 (attestation papers).

Private Nicholas 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 25, 2023.

