



Corporal Henry Saunders (elsewhere often found as Sanders) (Number 177097) of the 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in St-Sever Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference O.II.H.2..

(Right: *The image of the Canadian Grenadier Guards cap badge is from the Regimental Rogue web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *painter*, George Henry Saunders appears to have left little information behind him *a propos* his early life in the Dominion of Newfoundland. He may well have emigrated at an early age with his family as his parents were residents of Evelyn Street in Montreal at the time of his war-time enlistment.

He had already enlisted for a first time as early as 1905 – and likely before, as his rank was by then that of a corporal of the Royal Canadian Regiment – when he was married in Quebec City. The Anglican church of St. Matthew was the venue when he took the hand of Miss Mary Anne Read on November 8 of that year.

By the time of the 1911 Census the couple was living in the Ste-Anne District of Montreal with their two children: James, born in March, 1906; and Mary Anne, born in January, 1908. Henry is recorded as having left the Royal Canadian Regiment by then and as being a contractor.

By 1915 it would appear that the family had moved back to Quebec City and was living on St. Mary Street, this the address of his Next-of-Kin, his wife Mary, as documented on Henry Saunders' attestation papers – he appears to have dropped the name *George* by then.

However, on January 2 of 1915, Henry Saunders was once more in uniform, on this occasion that of the 8th Regiment "*Royal Rifles*" of the Canadian Militia. Perhaps due to his past experience he was to rise rapidly in the ranks: to lance corporal on March 25; to corporal on May 21; and to that of sergeant on June 3.

The Canadian Militia, however, was interdicted by law to operate outside the bounds of the country: its purpose was the defence of the realm. Nevertheless, units such as the 8th Regiment were not precluded from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions, nor was Canadian Militia soldiery forbidden – on the contrary, in fact – from enlisting in these new formations.

The community of Lévis lies across the St. Lawrence River from the City of Quebec and it was there on October 4, 1915, at the *Engineers Camp*, that Sergeant Saunders of the 8th Regiment "*Royal Rifles*" was then *taken on strength* by the 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*), at the same time undergoing a medical examination, a procedure which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*.

By the following day, October 5, he had found his way to Montreal where he was then attested by the local authorities.

The *official* conclusion to the formalities of Private Saunders' enlistment came to pass two weeks and a day later, on October 22, when an officer - with an unidentifiable name - acting on behalf of the Officer Commanding the 87th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Irving Putman Rexford, declared – on paper – that...*Henry Saunders...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

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Having been reduced to the rank of private soldier, perhaps for only the formalities of enlistment, Private Saunders soon found himself promoted to the ranks that he had so recently held in the Canadian Militia. Re-instated to that of corporal on October 26, he was once more a sergeant on November 15 – although one source records the latter as being an *acting* appointment.

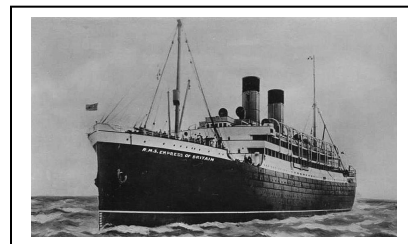
Private Saunders likely trained with his 87th Battalion at the newly-opened – in April of 1914 – Canadian Grenadier Guards Armoury on Esplanade Avenue, Montreal. The unit had been recruiting only since September of 1915 but was apparently very soon to be prepared, both in numbers and in the quality of its instruction and training, to be despatched to *overseas service* in April of 1916.

However, it appears from his records, that Sergeant Saunders was to spend a week of that interim period in hospital. Having incurred a venereal problem, he is documented as having been a patient of the Military Hospital, Saint-Jean, from March 21 until his discharge on March 28 of 1916.

The 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) boarded ship in the harbour at Halifax on the 23rd day of April of the spring of 1916. It was the *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company* vessel *Empress of Britain* on which Sergeant Saunders' Battalion was to take passage to the United Kingdom in the company of the 72nd and 76th Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the Number 3 Party of the 224th Battalion and a re-enforcement draft of the 13th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.

(Right below: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

The *Empress* sailed on April 25 to dock nine days later, on May 4, in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. From there the unit was transported southwards by train to the Canadian military camp established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which place *Camp Bramshott* owed its name – in the county of Hampshire.



It was to be less than two months before Sergeant Saunders would be once again in need of medical attention, although not for the same reason. It was a condition known at this period as *gastric catarrh* – likely gastritis – for which he spent four days, June 5 to 9, and then a single day, July 17-18, in the Bramshott Military Hospital.

The reason for his decision is not recorded among his papers but, during the month of June, Sergeant Saunders had requested that he be permitted to revert to the rank of private. The authorities acceded to his request and the change in status had come into effect of the twentieth day of that month.

Before they left on *active service*, that is to say to a theatre of war, Canadian soldiers were encouraged to allocate a monthly sum from their pay to a recipient of their choice. This was often a family member and such was the case of Sergeant Saunders who was to allot a monthly apparently irregular sum, as of May 1, 1916, to his wife, Mary Anne. He then also penned a Will some seven weeks later, on July 27, while still at the Canadian camp at *Bramshott*, a paper on which he bequeathed his everything to, again, his wife.

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



In the middle of August the 87th Battalion was ordered overseas. In fact, at the time, a great number of Canadian units were to cross the English Channel to France. The newly-organized Canadian 4th Division was leaving the United Kingdom on *active service*.

Private Saunders 87th Battalion began the journey by leaving *Camp Bramshott* on the morning of August 11, 1916. It embarked in the English south-coast port of Southampton onto His Majesty's Transport *Archangel* later that evening and documents confirm that it landed in the French port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine at a quarter past seven on the next morning, August 12.



(Right: *The photograph of HMT Archangel is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The 87th Battalion then marched to a nearby rest camp, thereupon remaining in the area of Le Havre for a further three days*.

***By this time a large Canadian Base Depot had been established at Rouelles in the vicinity of Le Havre and, until mid-spring of 1917, re-enforcements were to pass through there before being despatched to report to their new units 'in the field'. However, the 87th Battalion War Diary makes no mention of it, likely because the arriving units of the 4th Canadian Division were already organized autonomous forces.**



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

The 87th Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) was an element of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4th Canadian Division, the last such Canadian formation to be despatched to *active service* on the Western Front during the Great War*.



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

***There was also a Canadian 5th Division but, once having been formed, it remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of the war, for training and re-enforcement purposes.**

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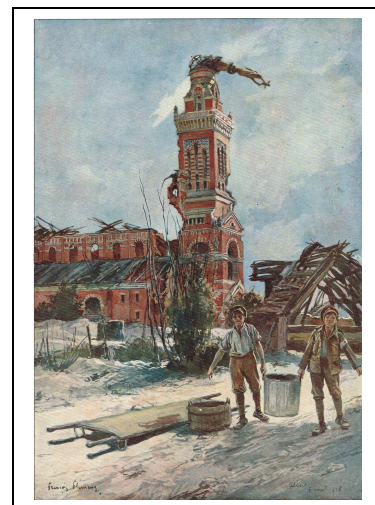
As reported above, the 87th Battalion arrived in France on August 12 of 1916, landing in the French port-city of Le Havre. Three days later, it and the entire Division was on its way north, to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and then beyond, to serve for six weeks in a sector to the south-west of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).

During this six-week period, on September 24, Private Saunders was once more offered a promotion, to the rank of corporal, which he accepted.

On October 3, 1916, having been withdrawn from Belgium only days before to undergo training in north-western France, the 87th Battalion was ordered by the British High Command to move south, to the area of *the Somme*, where the wretched British summer offensive had by now become a murderous campaign of the autumn as well.

Having travelled from the north at first by train and then on foot, the unit arrived in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert a week later. There the Battalion bivouacked, at *Brickfields Camp*.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers working in Albert carrying water, the town's already-damaged basilica to be seen in the background – from Illustration*)



Meanwhile, by late August and early September of 1916, when Canadian troops had first made their appearance in that particular theatre of the Great War, the *First Battle of the Somme* had already been ongoing for two 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.

On the first day of *First Somme* all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those 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, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

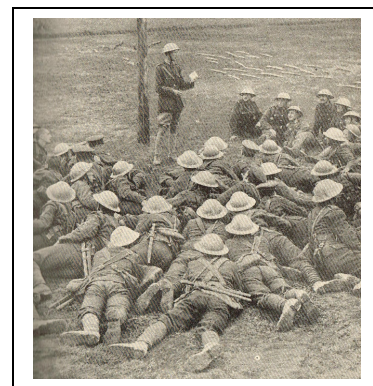


(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had arrived on or 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 Courcelette, a confrontation which had already occurred some seven weeks before the arrival of the 87th Battalion on the scene.

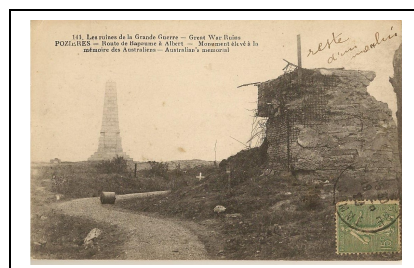
(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



The 87th Battalion had been situated in the forward trenches since October 17, but it was not to be until six minutes past mid-day on October 21 that the unit put its attack and captured the *Regina Trench* strong-point, an objective which had previously proved to be impregnable.

This success was unfortunately to be short-lived and *Regina Trench* was subsequently ceded back to the Germans following a counter-attack.

Corporal Saunders' Battalion then retired but it was to remain in the area of Pozières until October 30 when it moved into billets, further to the rear, in the town of Albert itself.



(Right above and right: *Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial may be seen in both images. – colour photograph from 2016*)



In November the unit moved back into the area of *Regina Trench* on two further occasions: the first passed with little incident; however, during the second tour, the Battalion was to be part of a further attack on November 18. *Regina Trench* having by then been definitively captured, the objective on this date was to occupy a number of adjacent German positions. However, the operation was to be only partially successful and the unit incurred a total of a further two-hundred thirty-two *killed, wounded and missing in action*.



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

(Right: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the First Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)



During the following day, November 19, the 87th Battalion remained *in situ* before its relief came about on that same evening.

No casualties were recorded on that day in the Battalion War Diary which, of course, does not exclude the possibility of deaths or injuries. But it may also have been on the previous day, or during the night of November 18-19, that Corporal Saunders was wounded.

The details of any immediate or subsequent treatment afforded to Corporal Saunders for his injuries, either in the field or in the rear area, do not appear among his papers. Later that November 19 he was admitted into the Number 9 General Hospital situated in or about the Norman capital city of Rouen. There, on that same day, he was deemed by the medical staff to be...*seriously ill*.

Medical report from No. 9 General Hospital: 19/11/16 *On admission patient was almost unconscious, & was suffering from a wound of the head.*

An operation was performed on day of admission. Wd. of scalp was excised & a depressed fracture of skull found. Skull trepaned & pieces of bone removed from brain. No F.O. (foreign object) was found.

Patient never properly regained consciousness & died on 21/11/16.

The son of William Charles Saunders, fisherman, and of Susannah Saunders (née Barnes) of Brigus, Newfoundland – perhaps before Evelyn Street, Verdun, Montreal - he was also brother to at least Susannah and James.

He was also, of course, husband to Mary Anne Saunders (née Read – also found as Reid) - of St. Mary Street then St. Patrick Street, Québec, Québec, before, in 1921, c/o Mrs. Joseph Read, 736, Evelyn Street, Verdun, Montreal - and also father to James and Mary Anne*.

**Much of the above is from a single source and requires confirmation.*

Corporal Saunders was reported by the officer commanding the Number 9 General Hospital as having *died of wounds* on November 21, 1916.

George Henry Saunders had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty years and two months: date of birth in Brigus, Newfoundland, September 11, 1885 (from attestation papers). However, Church of England Parish Records cite the date as August 1, 1885.

Corporal Henry Saunders 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.

