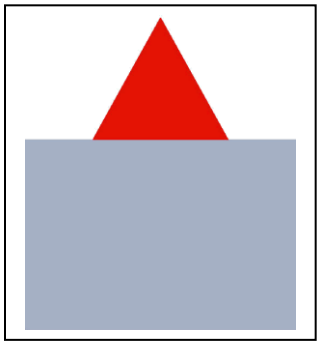
Private John Peter Smith (Number 648873) of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in the Faubourg d'Amiens, Arras: Grave reference VII.D.26.

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



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a repair machinist, John Peter Smith appears to have left little behind him of his early years in the small fishing community of Marquise in the Dominion of newfoundland. Nor has he left much in the way of information a propos his later movement* from there to the Canadian province of Ontario except that he may have had a sister Elizabeth living in the mining community of Cobalt. All that may be said with any certainty is that John Peter Smith was residing in the town of North Bay towards the end of the year 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

In his papers it is documented that he had served for an unrecorded time with the 97th Regiment (Algonquin Rifles) of the Canadian Militia. By law, having been created purely for defensive purposes, Canadian Militia units were prohibited from operating outside the borders of the country; however, they were not precluded from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions, and nor was its personnel discouraged from transferring to these new formations, as indeed a majority of its soldiery did.

It is not unlikely that John Peter Smith was engaged pro tem as a private soldier of the 97th Regiment until such time as he could be 'taken on strength' by the 159th Battalion (see below). Any records of this, available in many other cases, are unfortunately not to be found among the papers in his dossier.

A first medical report shows that it was on November 22, 1915, in North Bay, that he underwent an examination which found him as…*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. It is also recorded on the same paper that this was the date on which John Peter Smith enlisted and that it was the 159th Canadian Overseas Battalion (*1st Algonquins*) by which he was to be *taken on strength*.

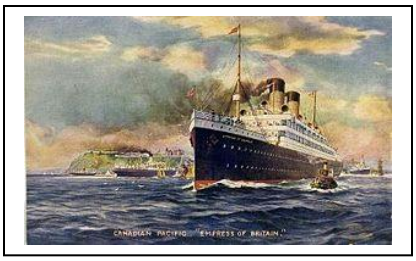
It was now not to be until February 4 that Private Smith was attested, this procedure also taking place in North Bay. It was to be the Commanding officer of the 159th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Frederick Armstrong, who witnessed the taking of the oath, and who also brought the formalities of Private Smith's enlistment to a conclusion when he on the same day declared – on paper – that…*John Peter Smith…having been finally approved and inspected by me this day, I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this attestation.*

Much of their subsequent training would have been undergone by the new recruits at or in the vicinity of the new Armoury – built in 1913 – in the town of Haileybury where the 159th Battalion was based. It was to be a long period – as was to be the case with a number of Canadian units – before the call would come to travel to *overseas service*.

Having travelled from Northern Ontario by train, Private Smith's Battalion was to embark onto His Majesty's Transport, the requisitioned ocean – liner *Empress of Britain* in the harbour at Halifax on October 31, 1916, more than eleven months after his enlistment.

The vessel sailed on the morrow with not only the 159th Battalion on board; also taking passage to the United Kingdom were two other battalions of the Canadian Infantry: the 184th and the 195th.

(continued)



(Right: *The requisitioned Canadian Pacific vessel Empress of Britain had been employed as an Armed Merchant Cruiser during the early days of the War until 1915 when, from that time until the end of the conflict, her task had been changed to that of a troop-transport.* - The image is from the *Wikipedia web-site*.)

The *Empress* docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool ten days later, on November 10-11. From there Private Smith and his comrades-in-arms were transported by train to the south coast of the country and to the Canadian military complex established in the area of the town of Seaford.

There the unit was now to remain until the first month of the New Year, 1917.

(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)

Those responsible for the organization of the various Overseas Battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force undoubtedly had expectations of these units all eventually serving in the fighting on the Continent. However, in most cases this was not to be*.

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.

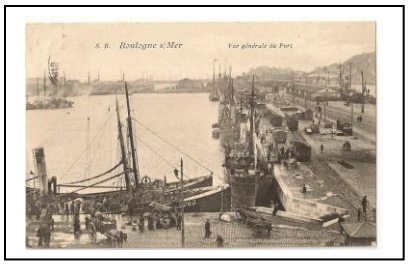
By far the majority of the Overseas Battalions remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and these were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by new units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

In the case of the 159th Battalion, the majority of the personnel still serving in the unit on or about January 30, 1917, was to be absorbed into the newly-formed 8th Canadian Reserve Battalion (*Central Ontario*) stationed at nearby Shoreham. Private Smith was one of that number.

At some time before April of that same year, the 8th Reserve Battalion had been transferred to the Kentish coast, to the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone. This was the site of another Canadian military establishment: *Shorncliffe*, from where a goodly number of Canadian soldiers had been transported since September of 1915, across the Dover Straits to *active service* on the Continent.

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

The 8th Reserve Battalion was of course, as its name suggests, a training unit from which individuals and drafts were to be despatched to other units already serving in France or in Belgium. Such was to be the case on June 16 of that 1917 when Private Smith was struck off strength by the 8th Reserve Battalion to sail on that same night from nearby Folkestone to Boulogne from where he was transported on the morrow to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the French coastal town of Étaples.



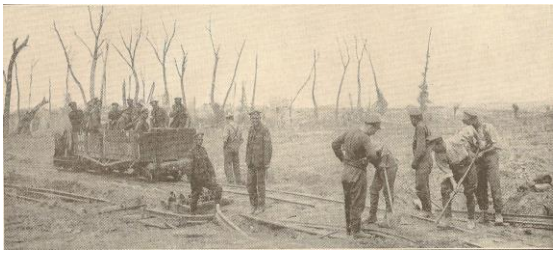
(Right above: *The French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

Private Smith reported *to duty* at the Base Depot at five-o'clock in the afternoon of the next day, one of a contingent of one-hundred fifty-nine to arrive from England of which eighty, including Private Smith, were destined for the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion by which unit he was now '*taken on strength*'. That particular posting, however, was still to be some time in the future.

For the next seventeen days Private Smith was to remain at Étaples. Then on July 4 he was posted – but not to the 4th CMR Battalion. His destination, and that of the other seventy-nine (see above) re-enforcements for the Mounted Rifles, was the 3rd Entrenching Battalion which, at the time, was working behind the lines at Bois des Alleux, in the area of the community of Mont St-Éloi.

Altogether, the arrivals to join the Entrenching Battalion* on that July 7 – it sounds as if the transfer was made on foot – totalled one-hundred twenty-five.

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



These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks.

They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However, these battalions also came to serve as re-enforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.

(Preceding page: *Canadian troops constructing a light railway, the sort of work also at times undertaken by Entrenching personnel, 'somewhere In France'* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

Private Smith and his fellow re-enforcements were not to join their designated Mounted Rifles Battalion for yet another seven months. During the first two of those months, laying pipes and construction water supplies appears to have been a major task for the unit, but the 3rd Entrenching Battalion was to remain in existence for only another twelve weeks after Private Smith's arrival, until the end of that September.

At that time most of its personnel was to devolve to the newly-forming *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp,* but the War Diary of this new establishment makes no mention of the tasks and duties allotted to the soldiery under its command.

This *CCRC* came into being in mid-September of 1917 at Villers-au-Bois, close to where the 3rd Entrenching Battalion was operating at Mont St-Éloi and was in fact to absorb all four – one for each Canadian Division – of these units by the end of the month. On October 9, the Camp – along with Private Smith – was transferred some twenty-five kilometres north-westward to the area of Callonne Ricouart.

(Right below: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries.* – photograph from 2017)

From there it would be more efficient, it was felt, to transport the troops of the Canadian Corps to Belgium where the Canadians were now to become involved in the *Third Battle of Ypres*: *Passchendaele*. The services of Private Smith, however, were not to be called upon at this time and he was to remain at Calonne Ricouart until February of the year 1918.

On the 22nd day of that month he left the *Reinforcement Camp* to join the 4th CMR Battalion. Some two-hundred fifty officers and men were despatched on that day of which twenty other ranks and a single offer were destined to the Mounted Rifles unit. Private Smith's draft is recorded among his papers as having reported to duty on the following day although there appears to be no mention of any arrivals in the 4th CMR Battalion War Diary for that day – or any other.

This may well have been due to the unit having been in the front line – near Méricourt – at the time, a position from which it then moved into support positions (see below) along the Arras to Lens railway line and close to the station at Vimy – the village - on the evening of the next day. Perhaps this was the occasion on which Private Smith was to first experience life in the trenches of the *Great War*.

(Right above: *The village of Vimy, several kilometres from the Ridge of the same name, as it was by the end of the conflict* – from a vintage post-card)

*** * * * ***

Some twenty-eight months prior to Private Smith having reported *to duty*, on the evening of October 24 of 1915, the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Regiment – not as yet a battalion (see below) - had disembarked in the port at Boulogne – all but its transport, which had passed through Le Havre - and two days later had entrained for the one-hundred thirteen kilometre – yet still five-hour – railway-ride to the northern French town of Bailleul.

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

****Not to be confused with the two other 'Aldershot Camps', one in England and one in Nova Scotia, both of which also became known to various units of Canadian troops during the Great War.***

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

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

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

The 4th CMR Regiment had retired on November 10 and much of the remainder of that month and most of December had been spent relatively peacefully behind the lines. As the days passed, a good deal time would be allotted to parades of all types interspersed with the occasional game of football and sometimes even a bath - but reports of any horses are less and less often to be found in the Regimental War Diary.

By now it was becoming progressively evident that the once-mounted troopers were to soon operate as foot soldiers: on December 31 of 1915 the War Diarist reported… *Infantry instruction now commences for all ranks. General Alderson talks to all officers on subject of change of establishment. This Regiment is now in the 8th Can. Infantry Bgde*. And is in the 3rd Canadian Division.*

(continued)

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

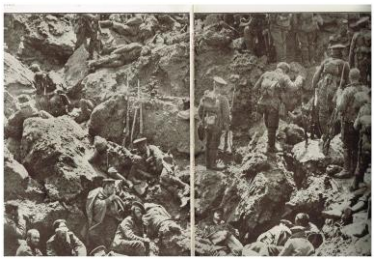
Thus the winter of 1915-1916 was to pass, relatively inactively as the 3rd Division had still been awaiting units to arrive from the United Kingdom – units which were to report in that February of 1916. Apart from the routine patrols and the occasional raids – by both sides – there had been little to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

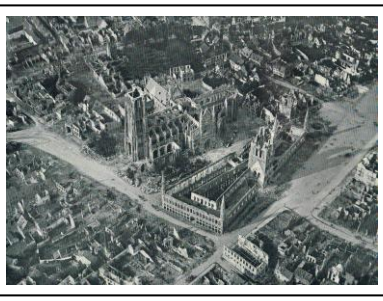
Then there was to be fought, five kilometres down the line from Ypres towards the Franco-Belgian frontier, officially from March 27 up until the third week in April, the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*; this had primarily involved British and then Canadian troops, but these were to be troops of the 2nd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

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

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

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence was to greet the newcomers who would take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.





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

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

The dismounted 4th Mounted Rifles' Battalion, and the 3rd Canadian Division to which it had been attached, during the opening period of the 2nd Division's encounter with the Germans at St-Éloi, had been in the process of moving into the south-east sector of the Ypres Salient – these positions protecting the eastern side of the city itself. Established there by the last days of March, 1916, the 3rd Division's first major confrontation with the enemy was yet to come and a further ten weeks were yet to pass.

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

Then, on June 2, the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under Canadian, and thus British, control. This was in the 3rd Canadian Division's sector of *the Salient*, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.

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

(Right: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres* (*today Ieper*) *whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance* – photograph from 1914)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had appeared to have breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans would be unable to exploit their success and the Canadians had been *enabled* to patch up their defences.

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

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation had been a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to go in – those that had been undertaken were to go in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy was to remain where he was in his newly-captures positions and the Canadians had been left to contemplate an extremely heavy casualty list.

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

(Preceding page: *Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, where the Canadian trenches were obliterated by the German artillery, is an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature*. *In June of 1917, on the first day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge, a British mine detonated under its summit removed much of the area's resemblance to a hill.* – photograph from 2014)

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

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

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

The action would come to a close on the night of June 12-13 after the Canadians had re-captured most of the area that they had ceded to the Germans eleven days previously. Thus the result had been status quo - except that the cemeteries were to be a little fuller and more numerous.

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

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

(continued)

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

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

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

As of August 28, training had begun in earnest. Apart from practicing with the bayonet, the bomb (hand grenade), the recently-issued British-made Lee-Enfield rifle*, to which of course were added the inevitable physical training and route marches, there were also lectures on and mock attacks in section, platoon, company and battalion strength.

(Right: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph to be found on another page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916* – from *The War Illustrated*)

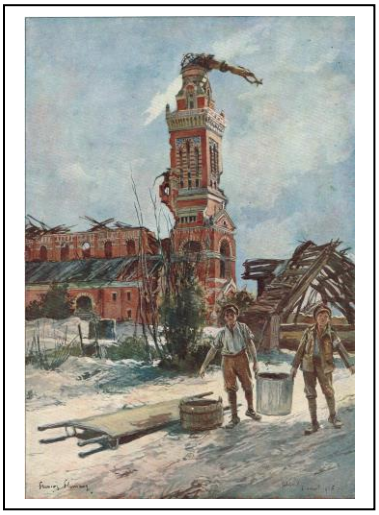
The Canadian-produced Ross Rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it would jam, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.

By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

On September 7 the 4th CMR Battalion had been transported from Steenvoorde by bus - and on foot - to the railway station at Cassel where it had boarded a train. After an overnight journey the unit would arrive in the community of Candas, from there having continued its transfer – once more by bus and on foot – onwards to the provincial town of Albert and to the large military camp to the community's north-west: *Brickfields*.

Troupiers anglais emmenés en autobus vers le front.

(Preceding page: *British troops in Belgium shown here being transported by bus, many of which had been requisitioned from the London area. It would appear that some of the potential passengers have preferred to walk*. – from *Illustration*)



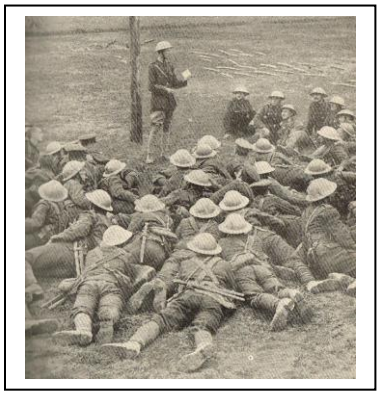
The Battalion had arrived at *Brickfields Camp* at approximately mid-day of September 11. Six-and-a-half hours later it was to leave there, having been ordered to proceed up to the forward area.

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

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

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

On the first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.



As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), 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 entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution had been in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

(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, in September 1916* – from *The War Illustrated*)

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

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

The offensive was to last about thirty-six hours for the 4th Battalion, CMR, after its initial attack at six-thirty on the evening of September 15*. It had eventually been ordered to retire at six o'clock in the morning of September 17.

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

The objectives for which the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion was to be responsible had been…*to bomb out Germans' first and second line trenches to the west as far as possible and to build a fire communication trench…to present front line.* (Excerpt from Commanding Officer's Report)

The 4th CMR Battalion had achieved its objectives but in doing so had incurred a total of two-hundred one casualties of which thirty-four were to be reported as having been *killed in action*.

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

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

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

This assault was to be unsuccessful. By the end of the second day of the attack by troops of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade – of which the 4th CMR Battalion was a unit - the German had managed to repulse all of the Canadian efforts – in the few originally successful areas having counter-attacked to good effect – and the attackers had been driven back into their original positions.

There appears to be no record of the casualties to be suffered by the Battalion on this occasion, but the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade's four Battalions had collectively incurred some nine-hundred thirty during the days of October 1 and 2.

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

(continued)

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

Well before that date, however, the 4th CMR Battalion of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, and the other units of the 3rd Canadian Division, had retired from *the Somme* and were to be establishing themselves in another sector of the *Western Front*.

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

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

Thus, by the last day of October, the 4th CMR Battalion was to be back in the front lines, having relieved the 2nd CMR Battalion on that day.

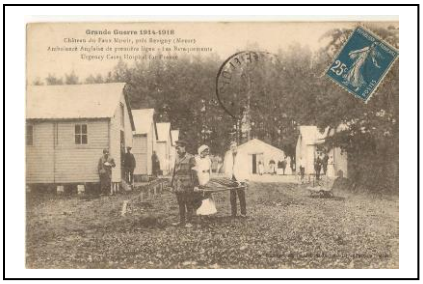
Contrary to most of the comments that he had penned during his unit's service on *the Somme*, the Battalion War Diarist had on several occasions now been able to record in his entry…*Situation quiet*.

The last units of the Canadian Corps left the area of the Somme battlefields during the first half of December to move northwards. The area from just to the north of Arras as far as the French northern town of Béthune, thirty kilometres distant, was now to become more and more a Canadian responsibility.

The situation was to continue to be…*quiet*: seven *wounded* and one *accidentally killed* reported for the entire month of November; several more during December; but fewer in January – while the Battalion had been posted at Étrun.

The winter of 1916-1917 – as with all the winters of the *Great War* - was to be one of that everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches. There would be little, if any, concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. Casualties, as seen, were to be few and the medical facilities had been much more occupied with sickness and – perhaps a little surprisingly – by dental work, than they had been by the results of enemy action.

(Right: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some* – from a vintage post-card)



The aforementioned raids were encouraged by the High Command who felt them to be a morale booster which also served to keep the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – in general, it appears that the troops who were ordered to carry them out loathed these operations.

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

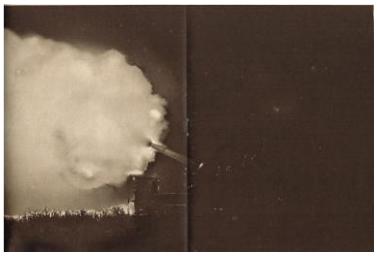
The 4th CMR Battalion was to be shuffled around as per the usual routine of the trenches, then, towards the end of February it had been ordered to Burbure further to the north for a period of training that was to last until the 20th day of the month of March.

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

By the end of that month of March the artillery had been daily increasing its planned counter-battery, wire-cutting, harassing fire. For its part, the infantry was to be undertaking raids on the enemy front lines, seeking information about the German positions, the wire and the personnel opposite them.

The training itself for the infantry involved, apart from the routine exercises, was also to involve some innovations: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts…

…and at *Vimy Ridge* and elsewhere, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the presence of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.



As the final days had passed that artillery barrage was to grow progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion had described it as…*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans would have become aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had been throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been extremely busy*.

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

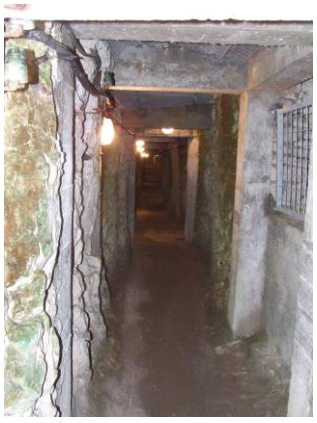
It must be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – although only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention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

By April 8… *Final arrangements completed. Conference with Company Commanders & Officers in charge of details at 2 p.m. – Plans were discussed and final details arranged.*

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

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

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



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

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

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

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 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*)

(continued)

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

The 3rd Canadian Division will attack with two Brigades in Line and one in Reserve as follows:-

8th C.I.B. on the Right.
7th C.I.B. on the Left.
9th C.I.B. in Reserve.

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

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

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

In the late evening of April 8 and the night of April 8-9 the 4th CMR Battalion moved forward through *Goodman Tunnel* and into its assembly trenches. At Zero Hour…*5.30 a.m…The Artillery, Machine Guns and 4" Stokes Guns opened fire as arranged and Infantry attacked.*

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

5.46 a.m. …Infantry have commenced consolidating enemy's front and immediate support trenches.

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

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

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

The remainder of that April 9 was spent in consolidation, in repelling a few and unusually sub-standard, enemy counter-attacks, escorting prisoners to the rear, and in sheltering from the inevitable German artillery retaliation, yet again only spasmodic, which continued for the remainder of the day.

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

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

The weather had been worse than bad, and roads and tracks had been obliterated by it and by the constant bombardment of the preceding days. Then there had also been the order to consolidate.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* to be fought in the manner of the first two days and, by the end of those five weeks, little further progress would be made and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

After *Arras*, and even prior to its conclusion, the situation had slowly reverted again to that of everyday trench warfare which now included the frequently-reported intrusion of hostile aircraft. Until the end of June the 4th CMR Battalion when in reserve had been withdrawn to Villers-au-Bois; when on support and front-line duty, it was to find itself for the most part in the area designated as *Vimy Defences*. With the onset of the month of July, the unit would be shuttled between the forward lines - where some of the time was to be spent burying some of the bodies which had been littering the area - and the rearward area in order to undergo training.

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

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

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

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

On August 15, a major attack had been launched by 2nd Canadian Division troops in the suburbs of Lens and just to the north, in the area of a small rise known as *Hill 70*. The 8th Brigade had not been a part of this offensive but yet, at the same time, it had been ordered forward from the rear area to take advantage of any retreat by the Germans.

(continued)

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

(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)

Presumed by Arthur Currie, the Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps.

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

These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, which was to employ newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* would remain in Canadian hands.

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

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

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

(Right above and above: *The village of le Mont St-Éloi, near to which the 4th CMR Battalion was posted on occasion, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbaye St-Éloi – destroyed in 1793 – are visible in both images.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)

On the night of September 4-5 the enemy had shelled the place with a mixture of high explosive and gas – a new one.

It was to be mustard gas, a blistering agent, which may take a while for its effects to become apparent. Thus… *It was not until the next morning, that the men felt the serious effects of the Gas which was still hanging around the dugouts and in their clothes. The gas smelt very much like mustard and causes the men to vomit, with swellings which made some practically blind.*

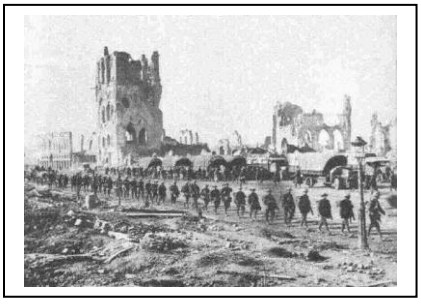
For days afterwards men who at the time were not seriously effected (sic), were being evacuated, as the gas when once in the system, gradually got the upper hand causing the man to become seriously ill…approximately 120 casualties. **(Excerpt from 4th Battalion War Diary entry for the night of September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

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

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

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

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



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

(continued)

(Preceding page: *An iconic image of troops as they file from the railway station through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres and past the historic Cloth Hall on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917*. – from *Illustration*)

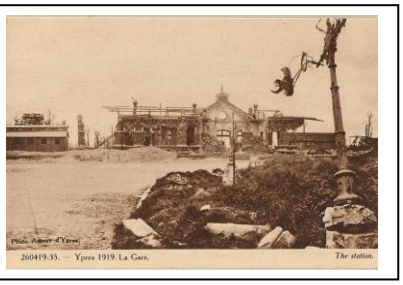
In the course of final instructions issued on October 10 while the troops were still in training, the following caveat, sent presumably from High Command, was to be recorded in the 4 CMR War Diary: *The Battalion is warned to assume a mobile condition* (*on "Somme" conditions, Brigade said*). *Mobile*, of course, was not an adjective to accurately describe *Passchendaele*, and then to compare it to *the Somme* was surely not the means to instil a feeling of any great confidence in anyone.

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

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

(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)

The 4th CMR Battalion was to begin its transfer back to Belgium on October 15. Having marched from Cambligneul at different hours of the day to the railway-station at Savy, the different units of the Battalion there had boarded trains* which then had carried them north to the town of Cæstre near to which they were to be billeted for the next six days.



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

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

On October 21, at one-thirty in the morning, the personnel of the Battalion had left their quarters – which they had almost unanimously found to be comfortable, attractive and clean – back to the railway-station at Cæstre. The train – which was to be four hours late – then had taken a further three-and-a-half to reach Ypres. Apparently, such had been the damage done to the city during the previous year that many of those who had already served there in 1916 were to find it hard to recognize.

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

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

Upon de-training, the officers and soldiers of the unit had marched across the remnants of the place in a north-easterly direction to the vicinity of the village of Wieltje… *where they were shown a field by an officer of the 9th Brigade, under whose orders the Battalion was placed, and ordered to remain there until accommodation could be found.*

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

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

After four days spent in and near Wieltje, the unit had moved to the forward area where it was to relieve the 1st CMR Battalion in the front lines on October 25. There it would receive orders for an assault to be undertaken on the morrow; thus, during that night, all four of the Canadian Mounted Rifle Battalions had moved up to their assembly positions.

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

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

(continued)

(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 to be remembered there; nevertheless, so great had been 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* (*see above*). – photograph from 2010)

Having been relieved on the last day of October and sent to the vicinity of the community of Watou on the western Franco-Belgian frontier, the 4th CMR Battalion was not to return to the forward area until November 6. What duties it may have performed there appear not to have been documented, except that after a week, on November 13, it and the 5th CMR Battalion had both moved to the rear, to the area of Brandhoek about half way between Ypres and the town of Poperinghe. There the two units had been joined two days later by the remaining personnel of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

Two days later again, the entire Brigade had by then vacated Brandhoek and was at St-Venant, just to the south of the French town of Hazebrouck.

For the 4th CMR Battalion the *3rd Battle of Ypres*: *Passchendaele*, was over.

The four battalions of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade had now been dispersed into several of the small mining communities – all within a radius of a few kilometres - of the sector to the west of Béthune. In contrast to the numbers of the preceding month, in the month of November the 4th CMR Battalion had lost but two *killed in action* and fourteen *wounded*.

It was not to be until December 17 that the unit was to begin its return to the forward area, there to relieve a unit of the British 11th Division in the sector of *Hill 70*, captured, as related on a previous page, by the Canadians on August 15 of that year of 1917. The 4th CMR Battalion was obliged to move the goodly distance to that area on foot and it was to be five days before it relieved the awaiting British troops.

Both Christmas Day and New Year's Day were spent by the personnel of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion in the trenches by which time life had once more become transformed into the daily grind of the rigours and routines of trench warfare. But it had surely been preferable to *Passchendaele*.

Nevertheless, the month of December had offered something a little different to all the Canadian formations serving overseas at the time: the National General Election. Polls for the Army had opened from on or about December 1 until on or about December 17, and if the number of soldiers which was to vote from the 4th CMR Battalion had been as high as those of other units recorded in the various war diaries, it would have been in the ninety per cent range*.

The Battalion War Diarist did not see fit to record this.

Apparently, at the same time, the troops had been given the opportunity to subscribe to *Canada's Victory War Loan*. Thus those who had been fighting the *Great War* were to be afforded the opportunity to pay for it as well.

(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – this photograph taken on the Lens front during the summer of 1917* – from *Le Miroir*)

Those rigours and routines of front-line life had continued for the officers and men of the 4th CMR Battalion until January 17 when the unit had been withdrawn well behind the forward area to be billeted in and in close proximity to the communities of Bruay and Houdain.

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert*. – from *Le Miroir*)

For the next month the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion would remain withdrawn to the rear area where it was to rest, re-organize and train. It was also to be re-enforced and thus it was that, just after this period, having marched southward only six days to man the front line in the area of Méricourt, on February 23 the Battalion was to be augmented by Private Smith and his draft from the *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp.*

*** * * * ***

Thus the early days of the winter of 1917-1918 had passed. The month back in the forward area would certainly prove to be less quiet than the preceding one: there was to be a great deal of aggressive patrolling, the objectives for the most part to take prisoners, to destroy enemy installations and to inflict casualties – and of course the Germans reciprocated. The neighbouring Canadian battalions were also active, undertaking several raids during this period.

Private Smith, however, was not to serve in the trenches during the entirety of that period. The furlough gods had smiled upon him and he was granted a fourteen-day period of leave – plus travel time – to be spent back in the United Kingdom. It was to last from March 3 until March 20 although that is the only information a propos which is to be gleaned from his files, although unless he had family ties there – not impossible -, London would likely have been where he was to pass his time.

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

He returned to duty on the day that his Battalion left the trenches after what had been an unusually long tour. Excerpt from the 4th CMR Battalion War Diary entry for March 20, 1918: *The Battalion after 32 days in the line, 17 in the Front Line and 15 in Support; without baths or rest. Was relieved by the 52nd Batt'n…*

The following day, March 21, 1918, was to be the first day of that spring.

It was also the day on which the Germans were to attack.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans were to come to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the war, the enemy launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21 – the first day of spring.

The main force of the attack was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the old battlefields of 1916, and it was to descend for the greater part on the British Fifth Army stationed there, particularly where its forces were serving adjacent to French units.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources say that this image is of neighbouring Liévin - in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area*. – from *Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for some two weeks, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and a great deal of French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was to be successful for a while, but had petered out by the end of the month.

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

Excerpt from the 4th CMR Battalion War Diary entry for March 21, 1918: *The Battalion was finally in billets at 4.30 a.m. this morning…the men turned out cheerfully about 9.00 a.m. to get ready for the working parties. Rumours of a great enemy offensive to the South of us were in circulation early in the afternoon… The working parties were…ready to move off…when an urgent message was received from Brigade ordering us to cancel all working-parties and warning us to be ready to relieve the* (British) *186th Brigade…on the night 23,24th*.

(continued)

The Battalion subsequently relieved five companies of two British regiments in the neighbouring *Arleux-en-Gohelle Sector* to the east of Vimy on March 23. It remained in that same area until May 1 when it was pulled well to the west of the forward areas, back to the vicinities of such places as Dieval, Lambres, Ham-en-Artois, Bomy, Flechin, Blairville, Bletencourt – all close one to the other.

The area just to the south and west of Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive. Unsure as to what the enemy's intentions were, the High Command moved the 2nd Canadian Division into the area to forestall any attack, if and when it occurred, to protect the avenue to the Channel ports and also the coal-fields in the area of Béthune.

In the event, the offensive in that direction was stopped cold by the British Third Army before it reached Arras, but during the period of the crisis the Germans had stayed active enough to keep the British and Canadians wondering.

As for the situation to the north, it apparently was never deemed serious enough to warrant any Canadian movement in that direction.

(Right: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery* – from a vintage post-card)

By that time a relative calm had been beginning to descend as the German threat had receded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but had gained nothing of any military significance on either of the southern fronts.

Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce*.

And the Germans were also busy elsewhere on the Western Front; the offensives launched against British and Commonwealth forces were not the only battles to be fought. During this period Ludendorff, up until late spring, was also busy attacking the French.

Yet while a great deal of ground had been ceded to the Germans on all fronts, on neither one had anything of military importance been lost – none of the Channel ports, nor Paris, nor the railway junction at Amiens, and the British and French armies had not been severed, one from the other, either militarily or politically.

The Allies from the point of view of re-enforcement were soon to be a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene*.

The arrival of those troops from the Russian Front was to represent the final substantial reserves available to the German High Command. On the other hand, as seen above, their adversaries would soon see not only a superiority but a supremacy in numbers. It was to be only a matter of time.

(continued)

An overall Allied Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(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 4th CMR Battalion War Diary entries of that period record little other than training and the occasional church parade. Casualties were exceedingly low, those for the entire month of June recorded as having been – NIL.

During all this period, since the German offensives of that spring had begun to falter, the Allies – their High Command now unified under Foch – and the newly-arriving American divisions had been contemplating an offensive of their own.

By the end of July the unit was stationed once more in the area of Mont St-Éloi, in close proximity of the village of Écoivres. The British role in the final offensives of the Great War was about to commence and so was that of Private Smith's 4th CMR Battalion – although at the outset it may not have seemed that way.

(Right above and right: *Écoivres Military Cemetery – adjacent to Mont St-Éloi - seen at the time of - or just after – the Great War, and as it appears a century later* – from a vintage post-card and (colour) from 1915)

On July 29, the 4th CMR Battalion boarded a train for Belgium. Travelling with the unit were a number of billeting parties which were – ostensibly – to arrange for the accommodation of a large number of Canadian troops. As is to be seen below, it was all a work of fiction.

On the following day the remainder of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade also departed from Écoivres – but going in the opposite direction.

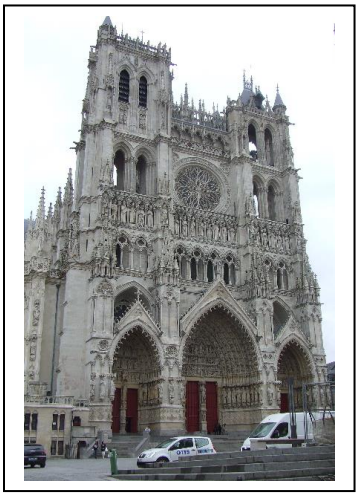
It marched during that day and the next, towards the larger centres of Mondicourt and Doullens where it boarded trains for the journey to the south-west of the city of Amiens.

(Right above: *The country town of Doullens in the Département de la Somme as it was at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The 8th CI Brigade was not alone: in fact, almost the entire Canadian Corps – with exceptions such as the 4th CMR Battalion and some artillery units – was being transferred from the sectors around and to the north of Arras, to the area east of Amiens where the German offensive, *Michael*, of that spring had finally had played out some four months

earlier. As with the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the units had firstly travelled by motorized vehicles and trains, to then eventually march to their assembly points.

(Right: *The venerable 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(?))



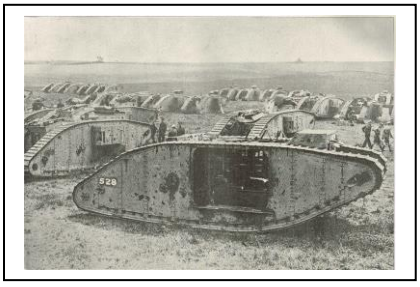
These marches, of several days duration, were undertaken during the hours of darkness to ensure that the enemy would have no inkling of the forces that were being amassed against him*. In fact, it was to ensure the *opposite* that several units such as the 4th CMR Battalion had been sent north into Belgium. The Germans were to be fed the impression that the Canadian Corps was being sent to the *Ypres Front*.

These forces were to comprise not only the Canadians but also British, Australian and French divisions, the latter with some American units attached. The whole was also to be supported by aircraft and hundreds of tanks.

The 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade moved eastward from Prouzel, south-west of Amiens, where the trains had left them, during the course of the next four nights – training with tanks during the daylight hours of August 2 – before arriving at the *Bois de Boves* assembly point on August 4.

Then, from then until the night of August 7, the Brigade moved forward in short stages, and again by night, to a succession of positions, well hidden in the woods, the final one being in front of the German-occupied village of Hangard.

(Right below: *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*)



It was during this last period, on August 5, that the 4th CMR Battalion arrived to take its place in the offensive, having travelled back from the British 2nd Army sectors in Belgium and the north of France. The subterfuge in which it had just participated was to play its part in the imminent campaign, the Germans believing the Canadian Corps to be in and about Ypres at the time of the attack.

The push began in the early hours of August 8. Of the four battalions of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade only two were to be involved on this first day, the 1st and the 2nd. It was not until the morrow that the 4th and 5th were ordered to advance through the 11th Brigade and to endeavour to secure the village of Folies. By the afternoon of that day, with the aid of tanks, this objective had been prised from the enemy's grasp and the attack had continued its advance.

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

The action of this August 9 had cost the Battalion a total of seventy-one casualties all told – four killed and sixty-seven wounded - and was apparently to be the single major attack in which the unit would participate in this, the *3rd Battle of Amiens*.

(Right above: *In one of the many villages liberated from the Germans, Canadian and enemy wounded await evacuation to the rear.* – from *Le Miroir*)

The 4th Battalion from this point on was to play no major role in the advance; in fact the offensive was slowing for a number of reasons, the main one being a lack of tank support. The machines had worked extremely well on the first day supporting the Canadians and the Australians but since then their numbers had been dwindling: mechanical problems and an enemy who was learning to deal with them had reduced their effective numbers to about one-quarter of those in action on August 8.

And on the flanks of the attack, the British and the French had had no such support from the beginning. That and the more difficult terrain to be traversed had meant a slower advance on the left and right which had left the Canadians and Australians in the centre in danger, unprotected on their wings.

(Right above: *A group 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 push slowed and was eventually halted on August 14-15 when a further advance had been at least postponed. And by this time the Canadians were about to be replaced to return whence they had come only two weeks before.

(Right: *Hillside Cemetery, Le Quesnel, in which lie at least two Newfoundlanders who wore a Canadian uniform* – photograph from 2015)

On August 18, the entire 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade was preparing to move back to the *Arras Sector by* train and bus; on August 19 it was travelling; on the night of August 20-21 it debussed at Lucheux, just north-east of Doullens, the 4th CMR Battalion being billeted in nearby Humbercourt.

The Canadian Corps was soon to be in action once again. It was being withdrawn from the battle-fields in front of Amiens - to be replaced there by French troops - and was to be transferred to the sectors in the area to the east of Arras.

(Right below: *British forces were not to be withdrawn as were the Canadians from in front of Amiens in August of 1918. Fighting in tandem with French troops they continued the offensive, as here in the attack against St-Quentin*. – from *Le Miroir*)

Foch, the Generalissimo of the Allied – French (and Empire) and British (and Empire/ Commonwealth) – forces on the Western Front, and Haig, the British C.-in-C., were giving the Germans little if any time to recover from the Amiens offensive which was, in fact, about to enter a second phase. There would soon be others.

At four o'clock on the afternoon of August 23, Private Smith's Battalion – with the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade – was taken by bus as far as Arras from where it marched during the night to relieve a British unit in the front line.

It was to be a difficult night: the German artillery was very busy with high-explosive and mustard gas. There were some immediate casualties but it was later that day that the delayed effects of the gas began take their toll with over one-hundred personnel being evacuated for medical attention.

The opening barrage of the *Battle of the Scarpe* began at three o'clock on the morning of August 26, 1918, the last troops of the 4th CMR Battalion having occupied their places in the jumping-off trenches a bare five minutes beforehand.

Excerpts from the 4th CMR Battalion War Diary entry of August 26 recount some of the unit's work on that day: The troops… *on this occasion were not accompanied by tanks and owing to the enemy having drawn back his own artillery and to his excellent observation from MONCHY* and ORANGE HILL on our own possible forward battery positions, little Counter battery work was possible by our heavies. Notwithstanding this, the enemy retaliation for our barrage, which began 4 minutes after zero, was decidedly weak. What there was, came down on our own front line, so that the 3 attacking Battalions, which had assembled in No Man's Land, escaped it.*

****The Diarist is referring to Monchy-le-Preux. Of interest to Newfoundland readers may be that on August 26 Monchy-le Preux was captured by troops of the 3rd Canadian Division. More than sixteen months earlier, on April 14 of 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment had been ordered forward into a battle that should never have been. While a desperate defence later in the day had earned ten men – nine from the Regiment – a medal each, the unit had suffered some four-hundred fifty killed, wounded, missing or prisoner.***

After Beaumont-Hamel, April 14, 1917, was to be the costliest day of the (Royal) Newfoundland Regiment's war.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen today from the south-west. In 1917 the Newfoundlanders, already in the village, had advanced out of the ruins of the place to the east, away from the camera; in 1918 the Canadians, attacking from the west, encircled the place*. – photograph from 2013)

At 4-52 the 4th C.M.R. Bn. phoned that the first prisoner had arrived at their H.Q. The identification, 358 I.R.* was normal.

At 5-25 a.m., a fourth lamp from Brigade advanced report centre on ORANGE HILL began working. The first message received was from the 4th C.M.R. Bn. It stated that they had been held up on the GREEN Line but their Support Coy. had come up in line with the attacking companies and that they were going forward again.

At 5.58 a.m. 4th C.M.R. Bn. phoned that 1st C.M.R. had come up into line with their troops and were well over the crest (ORANGE HILL).

At 6-10 a.m., 4th C.M.R. phoned that enemy M.G. fire from the low ground along the Scarpe was heavy and that two platoons had been sent to clear up that area.

At 7-17 a.m. a message timed 7.02 a.m. from the 4th C.M.R. was received stating "Situation is pretty well cleared."

Gen. DRAPER then phoned to 4th C.M.R. Bn. "Push on and assist 1st C.M.R. Bn."

(Right above: *A further view of Monchy-le-Preux – seen here from the south – and the ground which was being fought over by the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade on August 26 and 27 of 1918* – photograph from 2015)

At 11.30 a.m. a message was received from the 4th C.M.R. stating that a message timed 7.45 a.m. from their forward Company stated that they were in possession of all objectives…and that the 1st C.M.R. had passed through them.

Thus apparently ended the exertions of Private Smith and the 4th CMR Battalion on that day.

(Right: *German prisoners – perhaps wounded, although not severely – in the company of Canadian Army Medical corps personnel* – from *Le Miroir*)

The 8th Brigade War Diary entry for August 27 picks up the thread: *At 10-27 a.m. the following message had been sent to 4th C.M.R. Bn. – "8th C.I.B. less 2nd C.M.R. is in Divl. Reserve. The General Officer Commanding instructs me to advise you that if called upon, he will use your Battalion before the 1st or 5th C.M.R. Bns. You should keep in close touch with the exact positions of your Coys. and have all plans made to get moving at the shortest possible notice."*

Later…*The 4th C.M.R. Bn. were warned to send an advance party to reconnoitre the 43rd Bn. front, but not to begin the relief until further orders.*

For the 4th CMR Battalion and the other battalions of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade, August 28 was to be the last day of the *Battle of the Scarpe*. The village of Monchy-le-Preux vaving been taken two days before, the fighting was now to be in the areas of *Remy Wood* and the *Sensee River*, some five kilometres eastwards along the northern side of the main road from Arras to Cambrai.

…As the Jumping Off Line was distant about 1000 yds from the first trench lines it was a somewhat unusual departure to dispense with a creeping barrage to cover the advance over this ground. The G.O.C. decided however that the Artillery would be better employed for the whole 30 minutes in cutting wire, which was understood to be formidable and that our Infantry could deal with any enemy troops who might be stationed in shell holes in the intervening ground. This appreciation of the situation proved correct. No important bodies of the enemy being met during our advance to the trench system and the wire, which had been strong, being well cut…

…as our assembly had been carried out in daylight, it could not be kept secret from the enemy and we suffered some casualties before zero from shell fire. From zero on, the advance of our troops was never held up, and the absence of a rolling barrage was rather an advantage in allowing them more freedom of movement in avoiding enemy shell fire.

At 1-12 p.m. we were able to report to Division that our troops were in the first line…and that prisoners…were coming in.

During the afternoon Battalions were subjected to considerable shelling and machine gun fire and a few bombs were dropped by enemy planes.

(Right above: *Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon*. – photograph from 2015)

Following what had been a final successful advance, the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade was informed of and thus began to prepare for the upcoming relief by British forces on that night. At about six o'clock of the following morning, August 29, this operation had been completed.

By this time it was likely that Private Smith was on his way to the 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance which was to only be established at about half-past ten on that same morning in Arras. He had incurred penetrating gun-shot wounds to the abdomen.

The son of Michael Smith, fisherman, and of Jane Anne Smith (née *Griffin*) – to whom on September 27, 1916, he had willed his all, and also to whom, as of June 1, 1918, he had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay -, of Marquise in the District of Placentia, he was also brother to Henry-Joseph, Mary, Jane-Joseph, Rose-Mary, James, Joseph-Melton(?), William, Ellen and also to perhaps Elizabeth*.

(*The above photograph of John Peter Smith is by courtesy of the Provincial Archives*.)

Private Smith was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance as having *died of wounds* on August 29, 1918.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission documents him as having been husband to Annie (no further details), but nowhere else has the author been able to find any corroboration for this claim.

John Peter Smith had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-four years and one month: date of birth at Marquise, Newfoundland, October 28, 1891 (from Roman Catholic Parish Records).

Private John Peter Smith was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

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