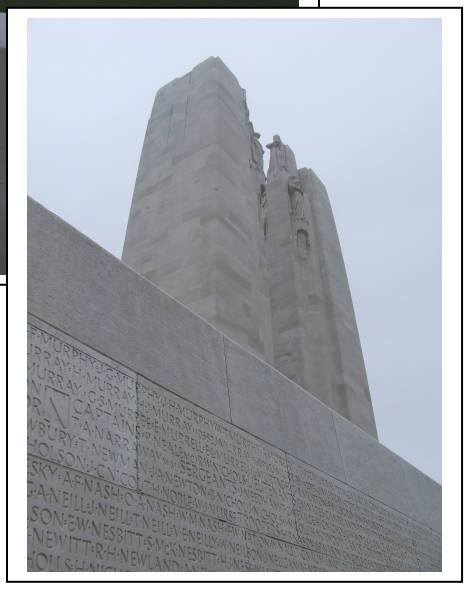


Private Vincent Francis Smith, Number 716181, of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on *Vimy Ridge*.

(Right: *The image of the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from the Wikipedia web-site*.)

(continued)

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of electrician and machinist, Vincent Francis Smith appears to have left behind him little if any information *a propos* his early years in the Dominion of Newfoundland.

However, he and his family are documented in both the 1901 and 1911 Census for Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The 1901 version cites his mother, father and five children as resident in North Sydney, the family having emigrated in the year 1896, perhaps for the father to find work as a carpenter. The Census for 1911 records the year of emigration as 1900 and the family, minus the oldest daughter, Minnie, as now living at 94, James Street, in the suburb of Whitney Pier in the industrial city of Sydney.

It is likely that it was in the latter part of this period between Censuses that son Vincent had found his way into the United States as his attestation papers record that he had spent three years serving in the American Army - which he had left with a 1st Class Discharge Certificate - before arriving back in Canada in time for that 1911 Census*.

His American service was presumably not after this date as his and his wife Minnie's two sons (see below) were both born in Sydney.

Subsequent to 1911 he had married, taking the hand of a Miss Minnie Lynch* - there appear to be no details of the marriage – the couple then having made their home at 11 Bay Street in Sydney, his address at the time of his enlistment. Vincent and Minnie were to have two children, Patrick Adrian – born September 10, 1912 – and Earl Clayton – born December 15, 1913 – both of whom apparently were to die before the autumn of 1916.

His attestation papers record Mary as his wife's name: the birth records of the couple's two children both document her as Minnie.

His first pay records show that it was on April 29, 1916, that the Canadian Army* first began to remunerate Private Smith for his services to the 106th Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), by which unit he had been *taken on strength* on the same date.

The term 'Canadian Army' apparently did not come into official use until 1940.

These first formalities likely were to have taken place in Sydney, but five days later, on May 3, the process was to continue in the town of Truro where the 106th Battalion was headquartered.

According to an account written by one of the 106th Battalion's other recruits, the first young men who had enlisted in Cape Breton, having been transferred southward to Truro for the express purpose of, ostensibly, undertaking training, had been boarded in either local hotels on in the Y.M.C.A..

There was, however, apparently – this from the same source – to be very little of the aforementioned training: at Truro there had apparently been no barracks, no firing range and no parade ground, and it would appear that shovelling snow and marching had comprised much of the exercise for the 106th Battalion's Truro detachment during the first sixth months of the unit's existence.

(continued)

This was not likely so in Private Smith's case as presumably spring was already in the air when he arrived in Truro on the train from Sydney. Then again, maybe the flowers of spring were not his priority as there was still the process of attestation to be undertaken.

On that May 3 Private Smith underwent a medical examination, a procedure which found him to be…*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.* This was accompanied by his attestation which was overseen and witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

Two weeks less a day were now to pass before the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion on May 16 by the Commanding Officer of the 106th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Major Robert Innes - not long afterwards to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel - when he declared – on paper – that…*Vincent Francis Smith…having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

A further seven weeks after this episode, Private Smith and his 106th Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain* in the harbour at Halifax. The date was July 15 of 1916.

The unit was not to travel alone during its trans-Atlantic crossing; also taking passage on the vessel were the 93rd and 105th Battalions of Canadian Infantry, the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*), the 5th Draft of the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the 8th Draft of 'C' Battery of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.

(Above right: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Wikipedia website*.)

The *Empress* sailed later on the same July 15, and docked some ten days later again, after a rough crossing, in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on July 25. From there Private Smith's unit was transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* which had by that time been established on the Dover Straits in close proximity to the town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent.

Some ten weeks following, the mandatory training by then having been completed at the subsidiary *Lower Dibgate Camp*, the 106th Battalion might have now been expecting its cross-Channel transfer to *active service* on the Western Front. But this was not to be*.

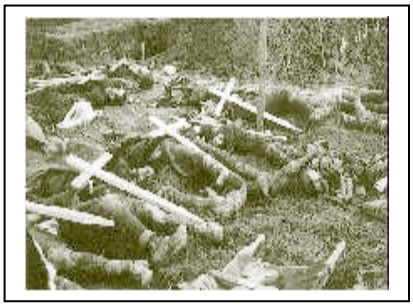
(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 2016)

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

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front.

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

By October of 1916 of the *Great War*, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for almost two months during which time it had suffered horrific losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that much of the personnel of the Canadian units which had remained in England was now to be deployed.



(Right: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial* – an unidentified photograph)

Medical problems were now to intercede during this period in Private Smith's military career. Some six months previous, while working, he had incurred severe electrical burns to his right arm. These injuries at the time had seemed to have healed, but the healing had been only superficial, covered by a thin and fragile coating of new skin; underneath, the wound had ulcerated and in the month of August this deep-seated problem had begun to manifest itself.

Only days after having been posted to Greenwich to the Canadian Arms Inspection and Repair Depot, he was to return for treatment for his arm to the Brigade Hospital at *Shorncliffe*, on August 21. The ulceration, however, had by now spread considerably and after three weeks it had been decided to transfer him to the nearby *Moore Barracks Hospital* for further analysis and attention. He entered *Moore Barracks* on September 12.

The results of the tests undertaken there were to say the least perplexing: they appeared to suggest the presence of tertiary syphilis although Private Smith had no history of – nor any external signs of – the malady. And when administered anti-syphilitic drugs, he was to exhibit none of the expected side-effects – but on the other hand, his ulceration simultaneously began to diminish.

Transferred once again on September 29, on this occasion to the *Shorncliffe* Military Hospital, it was now decided to forward him and his problem to Etchinghill Canadian Military Hospital, a facility specializing in venereal disease, there to undergo therapeutic tests with *Salvarsan 606,* an anti-syphilitic drug. His diagnosis at the time was NYD – Not Yet Determined. It was to remain thus.

Discharged *to duty* from Etchinghill on October 27, his ulcers by now completely cured, his other problem still a mystery, Private Smith would return to the *Shorncliffe* complex where he was to find himself posted to a different unit, the 40th Reserve Battalion.

*** * * * ***

(continued)

On October 5, a number of Private Smith's comrades-in-arms had crossed from Folkestone en route to the Continent, and through Boulogne on the coast opposite to serve in units already fighting there. However, the *majority* of the 106th Battalion had remained to be absorbed on that day by the Canadian 40th Reserve Battalion located at *Cæsar's Camp*, another subsidiary of the *Shorncliffe* complex.

(Right: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

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

There were now to pass a further three months of training in England with the 40th Reserve Battalion before a further transfer, on January 4 of the New Year, 1917, saw Private Smith become a soldier of the newly-forming 26th (*Reserve*) Battalion. It and he were to spend but another four days at *Shorncliffe* before then being ordered to, and transported to, a second Canadian Military complex, that of *Camp Bramshott* in the southern – but not all that far-distant – county of Hampshire.

The call for Private Smith came at *Bramshott* at the end of the first week of the month of February when he was *struck off strength* by the 26th Reserve Battalion, and was transferred – at first on paper – to the Royal Canadian Regiment, to be then *taken on strength* by that last-named unit.

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

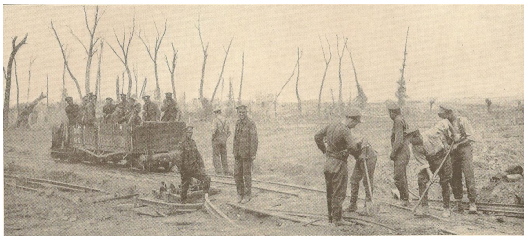
Likely having passed through the English south-coast port-city of Southampton and then the French industrial city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine, on or about the night of February 8-9, 1917, Private Smith reported *to duty* to the nearby *Rouelles Camp*, the main Canadian Base Depot in France on that March 9, one of apparently only eighteen arrivals from England to do so on that day.

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

He was to remain posted at *Rouelles Camp* for six weeks less a day by which time it had been decided to temporarily send him to the 3rd Entrenching Battalion. He is recorded as having left the Base Depot on March 22, one of two-hundred eighty-seven men to be variously despatched on that date and one of the one-hundred fifty-five who arrived with the 3rd Entrenching Battalion some three days later.

(Right below: *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 they also came to serve as re-enforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.



Pipe-laying, road-building and light-railway construction appears to have been Private Smith's lot in life for the eighteen days during which he was to be attached to the 3rd Entrenching Battalion. On April 12 he was to be one of four-hundred eighty men to be forwarded to various units, he apparently then having arrived with his new unit, the RCR Battalion, later on the same April 12.

(Right above: *A light-railway line in the throes of construction by Canadian troops somewhere in France* – from *Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

The Royal Canadian Regiment, although having been the senior regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of the *Great War*, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas to the United Kingdom in October of 1914. In fact, it *had* been sent overseas, but in a different direction, to languish for a year on the British island possession of Bermuda.

(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector, where the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions served in the winter of 1915-1916, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive showing in the foreground* – photograph from 2014)

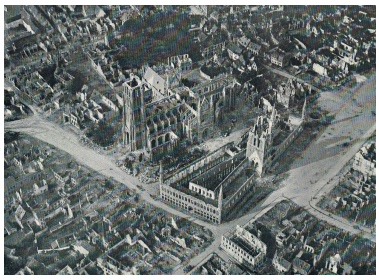
After that posting, in the summer of 1915, the Royal Canadian Regiment had been brought home to Canada, there to take the same ship onward to the United Kingdom where it had there been attached to the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the newly-forming 3rd Canadian Division.

The RCR* as part of the 7th Brigade had then been transferred to service with the fledgling 3rd Canadian Division on the Continent on November 1 of 1915, before having been sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division and then, at the end of March of 1916, to the *Ypres Salient*.**

The RCR was – and still is today – a regiment, a force which may comprise any number of battalions: today, in 2017, there are three. Some British regiments, for example, however, eventually recruited as many as twenty or more battalions to serve at the Front during the Great War. Only a single battalion - normally one-thousand strong but during the Great War oft-times comprising a lesser number - of the Royal Canadian Regiment ever served at the front during the Great War.

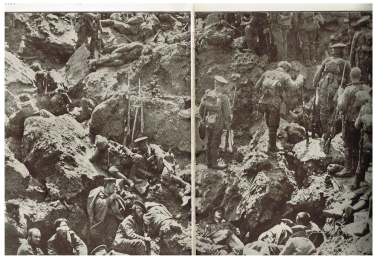
****The 3rd Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. Unlike the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions and, later, the 4th Canadian Division, it was not formed in the United Kingdom but, in an almost ad hoc fashion, of units already serving on the Continent at the time, and of others which were to arrive from England as late as February of 1916.***

The first months of 1916 had been relatively peaceful for the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division in the frontier area. It had then been in March, 1916, that the entire Division was to be transferred to the *Ypres Salient*, a lethal place at the best of times, to an area to the south-east of the city and in the vicinity of such places as the village of *Hooge*, and those that soon were to go by English names such as *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and *Mount Sorrel*.



However, in April it had been the 2nd Canadian Division, in a sector to the south of Ypres, which was to receive the attention of the German Army for a few days. For the 2nd Division this period was not to be as tranquil as the posting being undertaken elsewhere during that same time by the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 3rd Division.

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



The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* was to *officially* taken place from March 27 up until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it had been there that the British were to excavate a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they had detonated on that March 27, having then followed up with an infantry assault.

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle had been called off, both sides were to be back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

(Right above: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines* – from *Illustration*)

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2nd Canadian Division affair and the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the violent and numerous artillery duels several kilometres away.

Its *own* first major infantry action, some seven weeks later, was to be the confrontation with the Germans at *Mount Sorrel*, in the south-east area of the *Ypres Salient.*

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in *the Salient* remaining under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This had been just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, in the areas of the village of *Hooge* and those other places of English-sounding names as listed in a closely-previous paragraph. They are still referred to by the local people as such today.

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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to manage to patch up their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day – precipitately ordered by the British Commander of the soon-to-be Canadian Corps - delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, had been a costly experience for the Canadians.

(Right above: *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)

Ten days later the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost terrain for the most part had been recovered, both sides had returned to the positions in which they had been eleven days before – and the cemeteries, inevitably, were to be a little fuller.

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

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

(continued)

(Right below: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres – a British mine detonated under its summit in June of 1917 having removed any similarity to a hill: The area today is protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature.* – photograph from 2014)

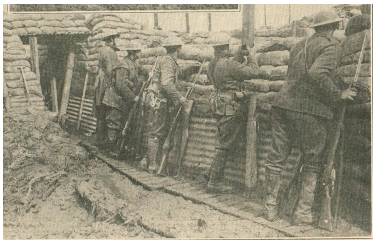
At the outset of the confrontation, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had been caught in the maelstrom of June 2 and had remained in the forward area until the night of June 5-6 when it had been relieved and had retired to Camp "B" well to the rear.

The unit was not to serve again during the action at *Mount Sorrel* where it had, by the time of its retirement, incurred some one-hundred forty-five casualties.

Thus the RCR Battalion returned to the everyday routines of trench warfare for some two months, after which time the unit – as was to be the case of most of the other Canadian Battalions – had been once more withdrawn, in succession as of mid-August, on this occasion for special exercises in '*open warfare*'. Thus the 3rd Canadian Division units retired from Belgium to make their way to the British 2nd Army training area in north-western France.

After some two weeks there, each of the Canadian Divisions was in turn to travel further south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

(Right below: *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 on the preceding page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles*, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916* – from *The War Illustrated*)



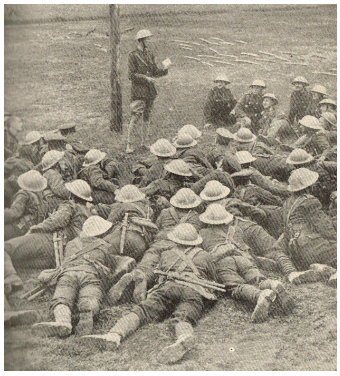
****The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition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

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 was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of just four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, which was to lose so heavily on July 1, 1916, 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 had entered the fray on or about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first collective contribution was to be 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 September 1916* – from *The War Illustrated*)

The RCR had arrived in the area of the provincial town of Albert in the late evening of September 13 and just two days later, on September 15, had been ordered to move forward in order to attack a German strong-point, the *Zollern Graben*, on the following day. By four o'clock in the morning of September 17, when it withdrew, the RCR had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties and the *Zollern Graben* was still in German hands.

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

Three weeks later, another major action was to follow: the attack of October 8-9 on the *Regina Trench* system was not a success: on the contrary, it was a further expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 10-11. By that latter time, however, the RCR was to be in the *Lens Sector*, some fifty kilometres to the north.

In fact, the unit was to be moving in that direction within days of having fought on October 8 at *Regina Trench*.

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

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

During the five weeks of its sojourn at *the Somme* the Battalion had lost, *killed* and *wounded*, about four-hundred fifty *all ranks*. Over two-hundred more had been reported as *missing in action*, the War Diarist having optimistically predicted that most of them would be later found in field ambulances and casualty clearing stations. The accuracy of that forecast does not appear to have been documented.

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

The RCR Battalion had begun to withdraw from *the Somme* on October 10. The Battalion War Diarist makes no mention of any motor transport or train having been employed so it may be assumed that the unit, as with many others, had retired from there on foot. The route had taken it westward at first, then had turned northward so as to pass to the west of the by-now shattered city of Arras and beyond.

(Right below: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras which had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916* – from *Illustration*)

It was on the 24th of that October of 1916 that the unit had arrived in the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector* to the north-west of Arras. The War Diarist on that date was to report the Battalion's strength as having been three-hundred eighty-six *all ranks*, less than forty per cent of regulation battalion numbers. *The Somme* had taken its toll.

The RCR, in its new quarters in the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector*, once more had begun the daily pattern of life in and out of the trenches*, a routine which had then lasted until the middle of February of the following year, 1917.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers while off-duty perusing the program of an upcoming concert 'somewhere on the Continent'* – from *Le Miroir*)

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 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles* – from *Illustration*)

Thus the winter of 1916-1917 was to pass in that manner for the Royal Canadian Regiment.

The Battalion War Diary is fairly repetitive in its entries: little in the way of infantry action except patrols and the occasional raid – by both sides. All activity was to be local and most casualties were to be due to German artillery – some two-thirds of casualties on the *Western Front* were due apparently to artillery action - and snipers. In addition, disease and living conditions – perhaps particularly the ubiquitous lice – were to take an additional toll, thus keeping the medical services busy*.

Perhaps surprisingly, treatment for a multitude of dental problems appears to have by far outnumbered any other medical attention provided during this period.

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

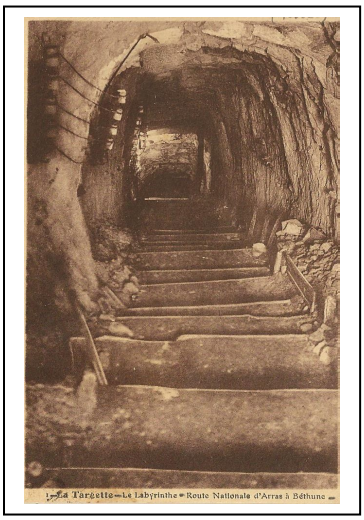
Then in February the unit had been ordered into Divisional Reserve at Bruay where it had begun five weeks of training for the upcoming British offensive; not that it had been all work: the War Diary reports sports events and concerts among the litany of parades, lectures, marches, drills, work-parties and visits from military and political personages.

(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many duties of troops when in support or reserve* – from *Le Miroir*)

On March 21 the RCR had moved forward into the trenches once again; after five weeks in reserve perhaps the change was to be a bit of a shock to the Battalion's collective system: the War Diarist notes that the new quarters… *LA MOTTE Camp, is composed of Bivouacs, with nine tents for officers. We are its first occupants. It can be greatly improved*.

But he also enters that… *"C" Company relieved the right Company of the 58th Battn. taking over the exact frontage from which we are expected to jump off*. Such an observation illustrates the recent policy of informing junior officers and senior NCOs of the plans of intended actions, knowledge that these aforementioned were to pass down to the men under their command.

And it surely had been becoming clear to the men of the RCR that there *were* to be intended actions; the forward and rear areas in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector had been hives of ongoing activity for which the unit had supplied working-parties and carrying-parties each day: dumping-areas had been cleared, bivouacs had been sand-bagged, stone had been laid for walks, new trenches had been dug and old ones deepened, troops familiarized with the newly-excavated tunnels and other positions, water-pipes and communication lines buried, artillery and machine-guns sited…



(Right: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth* – from a vintage post-card)

On April 1 the RCR Battalion had retired to Villers-au-Bois for a week, there to organize for the first day of the offensive.

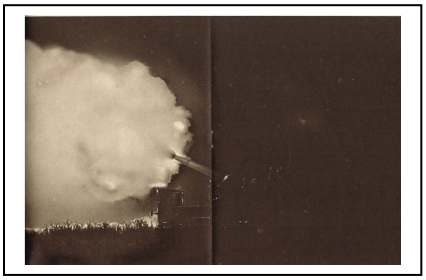
On April 7, the first of the unit's Companies had moved into one of those tunnels which had been hewn out of the chalk; it was hoped that these galleries would reduce the number of casualties with the men sheltering there until the last possible moment, and that it would also nurture the element of surprise.

The men of the RCR were to remain underground for well over twenty-four hours.

(Right above: *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)

As the days had passed, the artillery barrage had grown 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 had been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had thrown retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been very busy.

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



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

(continued)

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had launched an 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.

(Right above: *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, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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

For no reason other than that it is one of the more legible entries to follow, an extract of the experience of "A" Company during the opening of the attack of April 9 is here included as being representative of the events of the assault undertaken by the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry of April 9, 1917) *3.12 a.m. "A" Company under Captain Munn reports Co. in Assembly trenches.*

5.30 a.m. Raining. Barrage opens.

While the other three Companies were in communication with Headquarters at a relatively early hour, apparently not so "A" Company, not until… *1.40 p.m. Message from "A" Co. delivered by wounded runner stated that they had captured four machine guns, were in touch with Units on both flanks… and that they had sent a patrol over the Ridge.*

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened with all the trappings of war, on the advance over No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917* - from *Illustration*)

(continued)

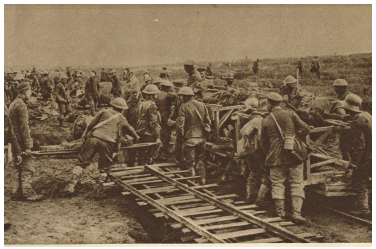
2.15 p.m. "A" Co. (left Co.) is in its objective. Strength 1 Officer and approximately 50 other ranks with no N.C.O.'s. It is in touch with "C" Co (right) who's (sic) approximate strength is 1 Officer and sixty other ranks… "A" Co. has sent a patrol over the ridge from which as yet no report has been sent. There is a small gap between "A" Co. and the P.P.C.C.L.I. owing to the shortage of men. We command the whole situation at present, but unless reinforcements and supplies of every sort, more especially S.A.A. **(small-arms ammunition)** ***available, machine Guns, shovels etc., are sent up at first opportunity, it will be difficult to withstand another counter attack.***

It was the 3rd Canadian Division – of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4th Canadian Division, whose objective had been *Vimy Ridge* itself, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions – with a British brigade under this second formation's command - having had objectives down the right-hand side of the main slope.

Of the some ten thousand Canadian casualties of the day, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had incurred fifty-six *killed in action*, one-hundred sixty-five *wounded*, and sixty-five *missing in action*.

There had been no attempt to capitalize on the successes of April 9 as the orders had been not to advance, but *to consolidate* – and in fairness it should also be said that the state of the ground because of the weather and the relentless artillery fire had made it impossible to move supplies and guns forward. Evacuating the wounded had been a further problem as an over-worked road and railway system found it difficult to respond to all demands.

Thus, by the time that Private Smith had reported *to duty* with the RCR Battalion on April 12 of 1917, the euphoria of the first day – in fact the first hours – of the assault of *Vimy Ridge* had evaporated.



(Right: *The railway advances in the wake of the troops on Vimy Ridge and, even as it is built, supplies are brought forward and the wounded are evacuated*. – from *Illustration*)

*** * * * ***

The five-week *Battle of Arras* having sputtered to a halt in mid-May, the Royal Canadian Regiment was once again to face the grind of trench warfare. However, for many of the other units of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions which were serving in sectors from the area of Vimy in the south to Béthune to the north this monotonous work was about to be spiced up: the Canadian Corps High Command had some offensive work planned – but there would be postponements and that campaign was still some two months in the future.

(Right: *The village of Souchez, just to the north of Vimy, already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British*. – from *Le Miroir*)

But first, many of the units were to be withdrawn in turn to rest, re-enforce, re-organize and…have a bath.

(continued)

Meanwhile the British High Command had turned its attention northward, once again to Belgium. There was to be a two-part summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, partly in the hope of depriving the Germans of the Belgian ports which their U-boats were using to good effect. However, apparently, at the outset, Douglas Haig had no need for troops from the Dominions of the Empire in the upcoming *Battle of the Messines Ridge* and the *Third Battle of Ypres.*

***That* was later all to change but for the moment the only infantry actions to be undertaken by Canadian units were the incessant patrols and the less frequent raids. By June 2, during a period in the rear area in the vicinity of Villers-au-Bois, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion was preparing for such a venture, an attack on the German lines. On June 6 the unit began to advance up to the forward area.**

Two days following, on June 8, the Battalion was in place in the *Avion Sector*.

Excerpts from the RCR War Diary entry for June 8, 1916: *Day fine and warm. Further preparations for the raid. Our artillery very active, especially the heavies. Wire cut satisfactorily.*
8.30 p.m. – Show up north started and there is considerable retaliation by the enemy…

…Other Ranks Killed in action 2; Missing 1; Wounded 6…

There appears to be no casualty report for Private Smith in the Canadian Government files; all that is documented is a burial report: *Just N* (north) *of Vimy, 3¼ miles S* (south) *of Lens*.

As was the case of many graves, that of Private Smith may have been destroyed in subsequent fighting, its whereabouts simply forgotten or its recorded co-ordinates destroyed or lost. On the same burial report is also noted – VIMY MEMORIAL.

The son of John Smith, carpenter, and of Ellen Smith (née *Kippen*) of English Harbour West(?), Newfoundland, he was also brother to Minnie, to Alice-Maria, to John-Frederick, to Elsie and perhaps also to Mary.

As seen above, he was also husband to Minnie (also found as *Mary*) Smith (née *Lynch*) – to whom as of July 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay, and to whom, in a Will penned on a second occasion dated January 1, 1917, he had bequeathed his all – he had also been father to Patrick Adrian (deceased) and to Earl Clayton (deceased).

Private Smith was reported as having been *killed in action* on June 8, 1917, during an offensive operation undertaken by the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion in the *Avion Sector* to the south of the city and mining-centre of Lens.

Vincent Francis Smith had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-nine years: date of birth in the District of Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, August 6, 1886.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The photograph of Private Vincent Francis Smith of the 15th Platoon, 106th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the www.angelfire web-site - A short history and photographic record 106th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., Nova Scotia Rifles*.)

Private Vincent Francis 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 24, 2023.