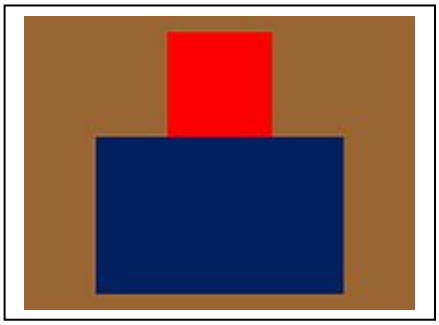
Private Frank Somers, Number 715679 of the 26th Battalion (*New Brunswick*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in LaPugnoy Military Cemetery: Grave Reference II.D.6..



(Right: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 26th Battalion (New Brunswick), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is from the bing.com/images web-site*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *teamster*, Frank Somers 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 the above-noted Censuses that older son Vincent had found his way southward to 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 service in the United States 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*.

These first formalities which likely 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 training undertaken: at Truro there had apparently been no barracks, no firing range and no parade ground, and it appears 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.

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 to be 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*), 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 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 *Lower Dibgate Camp*, the 106th Battalion would have 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)

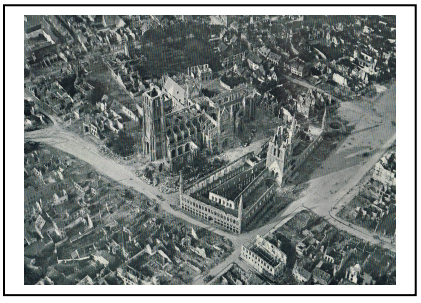
Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas just over two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had aspirations of seeing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

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

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)



The 26th Infantry Battalion (*New Brunswick*) was an element of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been serving in the *Kingdom of Belgium* since September of 1915. After having landed in - and having been transported through – northern France, the Division had immediately been posted to a sector in-between the by-then battered city of Ypres and the Franco-Belgian frontier.

(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*)

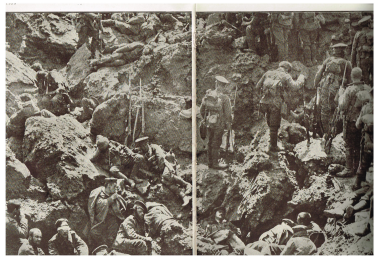
The Battalion was to spend the subsequent several months of the autumn of 1915 and the winter of 1915-1916 in the same area. During none of the winters of the *Great War* was there much concerted infantry action of any consequence on the *Western Front* and this one was to prove to be no exception. This period of relative calm had, however, allowed the unit personnel to adapt to the conditions – to the rigours, routines and also the perils – of life in and out of the trenches*.

During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front.

The unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.

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

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



After that *quiet* winter, from March 27 up until and including April 17, 1916 – these the *official* dates - the 26th Battalion had been involved in the *Action of the St. Eloi Craters*. The craters had been formed when, on that March 27, the British had detonated a series of mines - underground galleries filled with explosives – under the enemy lines. The eruptions had been immediately followed with an assault by British infantry units.

The Canadians were ostensibly to take over from the British in order to occupy the *presumed* newly-won territory; however, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, was to greet the newcomers who had taken over from the by-then exhausted British on April 4-5-6.

(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector* – from *Illustration*)

This had been the first major encounter with the enemy that the Canadian 2nd Division was to experience and it had likely come as a shock to the new-comers. After some three weeks of fighting, at times up to the waist in mud and water, at first the British – and then the Canadians who had relieved them – had been held in check by the German defenders and had incurred a heavy casualty list.

It appears from the Battalion War Diary, however, that the 26th Battalion itself had been only very *marginally* involved. During the period of the Canadian action, the unit had been… *standing by*, had been… *in camp*, or, for five days in a row…*Battalion in trenches, Large working parties working on trenches. Weather fine.* Apart from the casualties incurred due to his artillery, the Battalion appears to have had no contact with the enemy.

Then from June 2 to 13 had been fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the areas of *Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse,* the village of *Hooge* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps.

The Canadians had, it would seem, been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions dominating the Canadian

trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which, fortunately, they had never exploited.

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

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted by organizing an impromptu counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground of June 2.

Badly organized, this operation was to prove a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to go in – those that had done so had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to pieces - the enemy had remained where he was and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

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

Then for ten more days there had been some desperate fighting, at first involving mainly units of the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division*, but soon the critical situation had drawn in troops from other Canadian formations.

Officially coming into service at midnight of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916, the 3rd Canadian Division had trained for a period in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division in the Ploegsteert Sector before, in March and April of 1916, having become responsible for a south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.

The 26th Battalion had been engaged in relieving other battalions during the course of the encounter and it had been heavily shelled on occasion. However, it had not been in the forward area during much of the infantry activity and had been withdrawn altogether by the day of the final Canadian counter-attack.

By the time that the 26th Battalion had moved up to the front again on June 14, the action at *Mount Sorrel* and its vicinity had been all but over. During the preceding night of June 12-13 the Canadians had once again attacked and, thanks to better organization and a good artillery barrage, had taken back almost all of the lost ground. Both sides had now been back much where they had been just eleven days earlier – and the cemeteries were to be a little bigger and more numerous.

(continued)

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

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

Thus, after having played its roll at *Mount Sorrel*, the 26th Battalion had been relieved and had withdrawn to *Camp "D"* on June 20.

(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government.* – photograph from 2014)

The second half of that following month of July was spent at first in *Alberta Camp* and then further back again, at Brigade Reserve in the *Vierstraat Sector*. To compensate for this likely monotonously-calm period, the 26th Battalion was then posted back into the forward trenches for twenty-two of the first twenty-four days of August.

Having retired again to *Alberta Camp* near Reninghelst on August 25, the 26th Battalion had thereupon prepared to leave Belgium. The Regimental War Diarist noted in his entry of that day: *All ranks in the best of spirits anticipating the move and eager to effect all details in the number of days training, SOMME OPERATIONS.*

The training area for the 26th Battalion was to be at Tilques, back over the border in northern France and in the vicinity of the larger centre of St-Omer. It would require three successive days of marching for the unit to reach its billets at Éperlecques by August 28 before then having commenced training on the morrow. One of the first items on the agenda of December 29 had been the replacement of the Canadian-made *Ross Rifle* by its British counterpart, the short *Lee-Enfield Mark III*.

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.

A week later the Battalion had marched to the railway-station in Arques to entrain for the journey south to Conteville. A day spent resting in billets had been followed by five more on foot *not* resting, by a march which had terminated on September 11 at the *Brickfields* (*la Briqueterie*), a large military camp in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

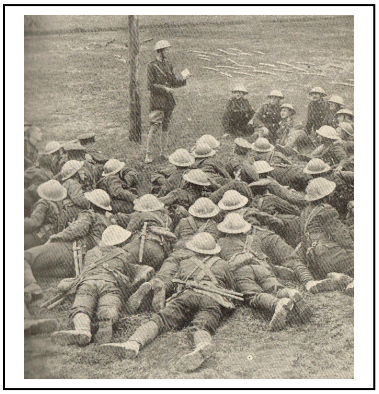
(continued)

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

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

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

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



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

(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*)

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

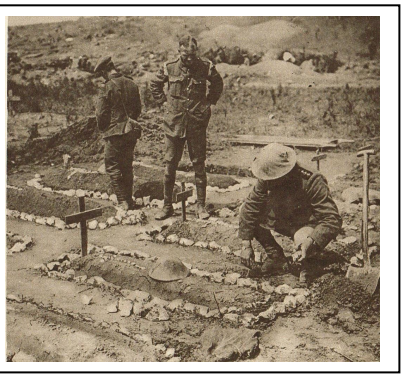
The 26th Battalion had arrived in the area four days prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette – other units had reported there on only the day before – thus those interim days were spent in preparation. For the attack of September 15, the 26th Battalion was in reserve at the outset and, as such, did not move forward until five o'clock in the afternoon, twelve hours after the initial assault, at which time it re-enforced the efforts of the 22nd and 24th Battalions.

On the following day, the 26th Battalion, according to its War Diary, was moved to the relative safety of a succession of shell holes, apparently staying there all day and… *where the most intense shelling was endured by the battalion throughout this entire day.*

(continued)

(Right: ***Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme*** – from ***Le Miroir*** or ***Illustration***)

On the 17th the unit was moved once more and took up positions in a sunken road, to once again remain there all day. The only exception was 'B' Company which assisted in an attack delivered by the 24th Battalion before it *also* moved there. The attack in question… *met with considerable opposition and rifle and machine gun fire was very heavy.*



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

On September 28 the 26th Battalion had been ordered forward once again, on this occasion to play a role in *the Battle of Thiepval Ridge*, more specifically on the right flank, in the area of *Regina Trench*. The operation had proved to be a further failure for the price of one-hundred eighty-two more casualties.

(Right: ***Regina Trench Cemetery – Regina Trench was adjacent to Kenora Trench, another daunting German strong-point – and some of the ground on which the Canadians fought during that autumn of 1916*** – photograph from 2014)

On October 10 the unit was to be withdrawn from the *First Battle of the Somme.*

The Battalion had retired towards the west before having turned northwards to pass behind, to the west of, the battered city of Arras. Having marched for the following five days, the unit had passed into the new area of Canadian responsibility, the sectors north of Arras as far as the town of Béthune.

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

By the evening of October 15 the 26th Battalion had completed its relief of a British unit in the *Angres II Sector*, in the area of the city of Lens, and had occupied positions in the front lines. On the next day, the 16th, the Battalion War Diarist entered simply: *Battalion in trenches Conditions quiet, weather wet.*

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

And it had been, of course, during those latter days, that the 26th Battalion War Diarist recorded… *Reinforcements joined the Battn. this date as follows: 32 O.R.*

Private Reid had arrived to take his place in the ranks of the 26th Battalion (*New Brunswick*).

*** * * * ***

The conditions were not to be quiet for long: on the morrow the enemy exploded a mine opposite a trench held by 'D' Company of the Battalion. The day was spent repairing damage and consolidating the defences. There were no casualties reported on that day but the incident may have reminded some of the troops – perhaps particularly any newcomers - that things could still be bad, even *away* from *the Somme.*

The next five months or so must have started to seem rather monotonous – and uncomfortable – for a great deal of the time, with a few instances of terror thrown in every now and then. For the most part the 26th Battalion was in that same *Angres II Sector*, in theory spending one week in the front line, a second week in the support lines, and a third week in reserve – although, of course, it never worked out exactly that way. And sometimes there was even a bath and a bed.

A unit in reserve could count on everything from a variety of inspections from those higher up the military ladder – and every now and then from a leading politician or a member of a royal family – to being seconded into working-parties. While in support there were more working-parties, route marches, training on new equipment, inspections from lesser lights on that military ladder, more inspections for trench-foot and other medical problems, and carrying ammunition and the like from the rear to the front.

During the period of the winter of 1916-1917 there had been little in the way of concerted infantry action by either side. There had been at least two large raids conducted locally by the 26th Battalion, and patrols and wiring parties were an everyday part of life, but this seems to have been the extent of offensive operations in all that time.

(Right above: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America.* – from *Le Miroir*)

Most casualties, relatively few in number, were due to the ever-present enemy artillery fire, but snipers were also a constant danger. Disease and living conditions as might be expected – particularly the ubiquitous lice and mites, prime source of scabies – were to take an additional toll. But perhaps surprisingly, it appears to have been dental work that kept the medical services most occupied at this time.

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

(Right: ***The photograph of Private Frank Somers 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***.)

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 – February 15, 2023.