(Acting) Lance Corporal Michael Burrows (Number 442342) of the 7th Brigade Canadian Machine-Gun Company, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in La Chaudière Military Cemetery, Vimy: Grave reference VI.E.19.

His occupation previous to military service in Canada recorded as that of a miner, Michael Burrows had already served in the British Army, in the 2nd Volunteer Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment. Having enlisted and attested at Vernon Camp, British Columbia, on May 10, 1915, it was only on June 16 - and also at Vernon - that he underwent a medical examination.

(continued)

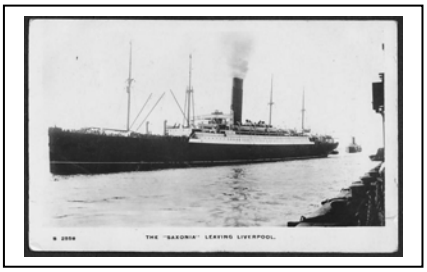
(Right below: *The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps* is from the canadiansoldiers.com Web-site*.)

However, the Canadian Machine Gun Corps – to which the 7th Brigade Machine-Gun Company would later belong - was not to be formed until after the date of Lance Corporal Burrow's decease – albeit only a week later.

His first pay records - which confirm the date of his enlistment as May 10, 1915 - also show that Private Burrows was *taken on strength* on that date by the 54th Overseas Battalion (*Kootenay*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and that he remained for training at Vernon Camp.

However, it was not to be until August 24 that his attestation became official: on that date the Officer Commanding the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Arnold Henry G. Kemball, declared – on paper – that… *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Two drafts from among the Battalion's recruits had apparently already been sent overseas, in July and October of that year, before the remainder of the 54th Battalion was ordered to the United Kingdom in November. By *that* time these afore-mentioned contingents had been parcelled out in England to other units as re-enforcements.



November 22 of 1915 was the date on which Private Burrows embarked with the 54th Battalion in Halifax harbour onto His Majesty' Transport *Saxonia*, after what must have been a tiring journey from the other side of the continent. The vessel sailed on that same November 22, to dock in the English south-coast port of Plymouth on December 1, nine days later – a second source says December 2.

The 54th Battalion did not take passage alone to the United Kingdom. Accompanying Private Burrows were also the 58th Battalion of Canadian Infantry and the 97th Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery.

(Right above: *The photograph of 'The Saxonia leaving Liverpool' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries*.)

From Plymouth, Private Burrow's unit travelled by train to the Canadian military establishment at Bramshott in the county of Hampshire. He was to remain there for two months until February 2 when he was transferred on paper to the 32nd Reserve Battalion and was transferred physically to another Canadian camp, this the one at Shorncliffe, adjacent to the English-Channel town of Folkestone in the county of Kent.

(continued)

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

There Private Burrows was to prepare for his eventual move to *active service* on the Continent.

(Right: *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)

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

That move came on April 1 of that spring of 1916. It is likely that Private Burrows' contingent made the short cross-Channel voyage from nearby Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite and some two hours sailing-time distant. From there he would have been transferred by train from Boulogne to a second French port, Le Havre, on the estuary of the River Seine and in the vicinity of which was to be found the large Canadian Infantry Base Depot.

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

On April 2, once at Le Havre, Private Burrows was *taken on strength* – although perhaps again only on paper - by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade Machine-Gun Company*.

In July of 1916 it was to be re-designated as the 3rd Brigade Canadian Machine-Gun Company.

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

This particular posting was not to last for long. The machine-gun was beginning to prove its value and more units were being formed, one of which was the 7th Brigade Machine-Gun Company created in that April of 1916.

Private Burrows is recorded as having joined the 7th Brigade Machine-Gun Company (7th BMGC) on April 28, one of nineteen *other ranks* recorded in the Company War Diary as having arrived from Le Havre on that date.

(continued)

This new unit was to become a component of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 3rd Canadian Division which had begun to serve in Belgium only months previously, in December of 1915. Being attached to the 7th Brigade meant that the 7th Machine-Gun Company was to support the efforts of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) and the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), as well as those of the 42nd and 49th Canadian Infantry Battalions.

Having for all practical purposes come into being during that April of 1916, the 7th BMGC spent much of that month solving the organizational problems experienced by all new units. This work for the most part was undertaken in the area of Brandhoek, Belgium, to the west of the medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*) - and also of the notorious *Ypres Salient* - where many Canadian forces were stationed at this time during the Great War.

(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 of it left standing.* – from *Illustration*)

And it was likely there that the Company – even though it was not, of course, an infantry unit - was to become acquainted with the rigours, routines and surely the perils of life in the trenches 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 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles* – from *Illustration*)

On or about April 24 the Company was being posted in the forward areas, to the south-east of Ypres, in such places that Canadian history in particular has come to know as *Sanctuary Wood* (see below) and *Maple Copse.*

(Right: *Maple Copse Cemetery – the majority of the dead are Canadian - a century after the action at nearby Mount Sorrel, Hill 60 and Sanctuary Wood* – photograph from 2014)

Thus during the month of May, life for the personnel of the 7th BMGC in – and out of – the trenches resembled the routine described above. In fact, on most days, the first entry made by the War Diarist in his journal was simply… *Situation normal*.

But the *normal situation* was about to change.

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

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.

(Below 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)

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

The 7th Brigade Machine-Gun Company was involved in the fighting from the very first day – June 2 – until the 7th when it was relieved and withdrawn towards the community of Poperinghe to the west of Ypres. Having helped to hold up the German advance on June 2, the unit was ordered to support the 7th Brigade's efforts during the (badly-) planned counter-attack of the next day. The Company War Diary reports only, at best, very partial success in these operations.

On June 6th the Germans detonated mines under the Canadian positions at Hooge village, explosions which were followed by an infantry attack. Several guns of the 7th BMGC were in the area and, once again according to the Diary… *these guns did magnificent work*. Nevertheless the Canadians were evicted from their trenches, positions which the Canadian Corps Commander decided to abandon to the enemy, to concentrate on a future counter-attack in the area of *Sanctuary Wood.*

(continued)

(Previous page: *Hooge Crater Cemetery – it incorporates 5,916 burials of which 3,570 remain unidentified – was a burial ground first used in the area of a mine detonated by the British in July of 1915. The area changed hands six times during the Great War*. – photograph from 2010)

This last-mentioned counter-attack was to be an action in which the 7th Brigade would not be involved as it had been relieved and withdrawn on the night of June 6-7, moving back into *Corps Reserve* at Steenvoorde in northern France. By the time that the unit served in the forward area again, from June 21 until June 29, the battle for *Mount Sorrel* was over. The anticipated Canadian counter-attack of the 13th had been successful in regaining the lost positions and thus the two sides ended up, for the most part, almost exactly where they had been on June 2 – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.

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

The months of July and August followed the routine of life in the trenches: front, support and reserve*. There appears to have been little concerted infantry activity by either side and it was only occasionally that the 7th BMGC was called upon to support a local patrol of *ours*, or to defend against a local patrol of *theirs*.

On August 23, the entire 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade was relieved for the last time in the *Ypres Salient*. On the following morning, at a quarter to ten, the Brigade began a march from the area of *the Salient* and, by four o'clock in the afternoon, the troops were being assigned their billets, once again in the French community of Steenvoorde.

Their orders to retire from the forward area were to allow for further training as the British High Command by then had need of the Canadians as re-enforcements in the ongoing offensive further to the south, in France. Two weeks after its arrival at Steenvoorde, on September 7, the 7th BMGC marched for three-and-a-half hours as far as Esquelbeck Station from where it was to travel by train and by a circuitous route – one-hundred twenty kilometres requiring almost twelve hours to complete – to the community of Contéville, to the north-east of Abbéville.

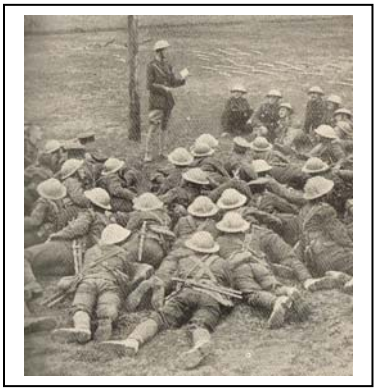
Having entrained at four o'clock in the afternoon, the Company reached its billets at half-past three in the morning. There the rest of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade arrived later that same morning.

From these billets the 7th Canadian Brigade now had to proceed on foot and, for the following four days, it marched southward to the area of *the Somme*. At twenty past two on the afternoon of September 12 the unit arrived at a large camp identified as *Usna Hill*, situated just to the west of the provincial town of Albert.

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

It was during this prolonged period of marching, on September 19, that Private Burrows received promotion *in the field*, to the rank of (acting) lance corporal – and *unpaid* as such.

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 span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.



On that first day 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 lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.

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

(Right above: *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 Canadians' first major collective contribution was to be on September 15 in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette. The first attacks had gone in on the morning of that day but the 7th Canadian Infantry Battalion, not having been among the opening waves, was ordered forward into an area close to the village of Pozières only later on, during that afternoon.

(Right above and right: *A post-War image of what was left of Pozières – the monument receding into the mist still stands - as is shown in the photograph immediately below – in commemoration of the sacrifice of the Australian troops fighting at the Somme in 1916.* – above from a vintage post-card; colour from 2016)

It was almost five o'clock in the afternoon of that September 15 when the four sections of the 7th BMGC began their final movement forward in support of the infantry battalions of the 7th Brigade who were also to advance at this time.

(continued)

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

By five forty-five, the teams of 'A' and 'B' Section were already in action and had already lost a gun and taken casualties. Some progress was made despite further losses; at seven o'clock – it becoming dark by then – orders were given for firing to cease for that day.

On the following morning before dawn the attack continued and the 7th BMGC supported it as on the previous day. On this occasion, however, the operation was a failure and around about noon the Company was relieved and ordered to retire to the camp at *Usna Hill* and then on to the one at *Tara Hill*.

Compared to the losses suffered by the infantry – who always bore the brunt of any attack – those of the 7th BMGC were light: four *killed* and five *wounded*. The dead were all reported to have been buried locally.

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

The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade remained in support for a number of days before beginning a march the reason for which is not cited in the War Diary of the 7th BMGC*.

But logically, the purpose was to free up billets for incoming troops who would soon be thrown into the mix. The consolation for those of the 7th Brigade on the march was that they were not in the trenches and not being shot at.

On September 23 the entire 7th Brigade departed from Albert on foot at eight o'clock in the morning. For the ensuing six days it passed through village after village, billeted at a different venue each night until, by a round-about route, on September 28th it passed by its starting point, continuing until it regained *Usna Hill* once more. On the 29th the 7th BMGC itself moved back into billets in the town of Albert. By this time some of the marchers must have been shaking their head – and rubbing their feet.

A three-day tour in the front area in the *Regina Trench* Sector was begun on October 2, the Company retiring on the 4th, to return to the same area by the 7th. An attack was to proceed on the following day for which the Company's machine-guns were to lay down a covering barrage.

The attack went in before dawn and the Company's guns continued firing from then until the afternoon – 'C' and 'D' Sections apparently firing some seventy-thousand rounds during that period. On the following day, October 9, three of the four sections moved back to Albert while 'D' Section was attached to the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

(continued)

(Right: *Evacuating Canadian casualties in hand-carts after the battle – somewhere on the Somme* – from *Illustration* or *Le Miroir*)

The 7th BMGC remained in the area of Albert, in reserve, until October 16, although it was to have no further involvement in the fighting of *1st Somme*. On that date the Company marched from its billets at Warloy to the community of Acheux from where it took a train westward to Candas.

From Candas, however, the rest of the transfer was to be accomplished on foot. It marched northwards behind the shattered city of Arras and some twenty kilometres beyond, to an area behind the lines.

Lance Corporal Burrow's unit arrived at its destination, Écoivres – *this* Écoivres (there is a second community so-named in the region) is adjacent near the village of Mont-St-Éloi* – on September 23 and there was allotted billets. The arrangement appears to have been temporary for much of the unit's personnel, as by nine o'clock of that evening over half of its strength had been moved to Neuville St-Vaast where it had relieved the 180th Machine-Gun Company in the front line.

(Right and right below: *The village of St-Éloi at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)

Mont St-Éloi is not to be confused with St. Eloy (St-Éloi) in southern Belgium where Canadian forces had also served, in the spring of 1916. The community in this narrative is to be found to the north-west of the city of Arras in northern France and it was, at the time, well behind the lines.

The Company War Diarist at the end of November enters the following final note: *This ends the quietest month in the history of the Company*.

Likewise for December: *A very quiet month, varied only from November by a slight increase in trench mortar activity. Casualties during the whole month were "Nil".*

While it cannot be said that the casualty counts for the months of January and February were *nil*, the word was employed adjacent to several dates in the Company War Diary to describe the activities of the day. And apart from the occasional covering fire given to raiding parties at work, the period from the beginning of January until mid-February was, as it had been in November and December, a succession of *quiet* tours to the front, to support and to reserve.

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

Then on February 15 the 7th BMGC was ordered into reserve at Bruay for weeks of training, inspections, lectures and parades which were per times the occasion for the awarding of medals and the such-like. And every now and then a bath was ordered.

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

But all the intensive training was for a definite purpose as, by this time, the British High Command was beginning more and more to understand the potential of the machine-gun: the weapon was coming of age. On March 21, after some five weeks at Bruay, the 7th BMGC marched to the Chateau Gouy-Servins - some ten kilometres west of the mining centre of Lens - there to become an element of what was an imposing force of six Canadian machine-gun companies.

(Above right: *Canadian Machine-gun troops becoming acquainted with their recently-acquired British-built Vickers machine-guns* – from *Illustration* or *Le Miroir*)

All of this was, of course, in preparation for the attack, just days hence, by the Canadians on Vimy Ridge. As part of the preparation for this operation, a great deal of time and myriad resources had been spent in the construction of a so-called Machine-Gun Fort in the Vimy Sector to assist in the forthcoming events.

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

While the British campaign was to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was nothing short of a disaster.

(Right above: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

(continued)

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, British troops were under *Canadian* command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having almost cleared its entirety of its German occupants.

Two of the four battalions of the 7th Brigade – but not the 7th BMGC – were to approach their jumping-off positions by means of one of the myriad galleries – an innovation at this stage of the war - which had been tunnelled for that purpose.

(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 – or burdened 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*)

Five days prior to the attack, at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 4, the 7th BMGC had moved forward to the line to positions which, for the following four days, were to be prepared for the upcoming attack. The Company War Diary presents the following account (*partial*) of the events, five days afterwards, of April 9.

The Guns assigned to be in close support to the individual units of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade… moved forward at zero plus 30 and took up forward positions for the defence of the newly consolidated line.

2 Guns of "A" Section and 2 Guns of "B" Section remained at Jumping Off points and were brought to their respective Sections… when forward Guns were located.

The Guns assigned to be in close support to the individual units of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade… moved forward at zero plus 30 and took up forward positions for the defence of the newly consolidated line.

2 Guns of "A" Section and 2 Guns of "B" Section remained at Jumping Off points and were brought to their respective Sections… when forward Guns were located.

During their advance 2 Guns of "A" Section succeeded in driving Enemy Aeroplane which crashed to earth. "C" Section protected the Divisional Flank.

(continued)

Satisfactory reports were at Company Headquarters at 8.00.A.M. from all Guns.

(Right: *Worthy adversaries: A German machine-gunner – staunch opponents all during the Great War - dead at his post* – from *Illustration*)

Casualty Report on Lance Corporal Burrows: *KIA – Killed by enemy machine-gun fire, during the attack at Vimy Ridge.*

On his enlistment papers he noted his next-of-kin as being a Mrs. Helen Scott – address c/o P.J. Sheran* – cited as *a friend*, to whom he had willed his all on May 9, 1916, by which date he was already serving on the Continent – of 718, Baker Street, Nelson, British Columbia.

Mr. Sheran also later received Lance Corporal Burrows' medals.

Michael Burrows had enlisted at the *apparent age* of thirty-four years: his recorded date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, May 31, 1881.

(Acting) Lance Corporal Michael Burrows was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).