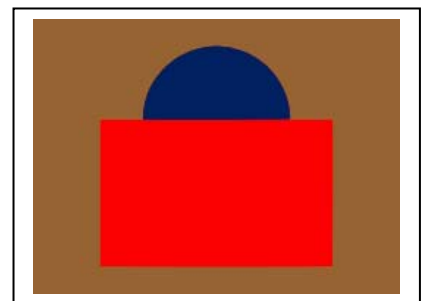


Lance Corporal Elihu James Clarke (Number 444236\* and A44236) of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*), Canadian Infantry, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder patch of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) is from the Wikipedia Website.*

*\*Library and Archives Canada does not recognize this number – use A44236.*

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, Elihu James Clarke appears to have left no records pertaining to his passage from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of New Brunswick. It was there in Saint John – likely at the local Armoury - that he presented himself on April 22 of 1915 for medical examination before apparently both enlisting and attesting on the same day.

It was some three weeks later, on May 13, that Private Clarke was officially attached to an infantry unit, to the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*New Brunswick & Prince Edward Island*). On June 15, only a single month subsequent, the unit was ordered transferred to the recently-established Valcartier Mobilization Camp in Québec for training.

(Right: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – photograph (from a later date in the war) from *The War Illustrated**)



*\*Strangely, even though his enlistment papers attest to his being attached to the 55<sup>th</sup>, he does not seem to be included in the Battalion's 1915 nominal roll, even though he must have been among the first to enlist.*

Private Clarke's stay at Valcartier – if he were there at all – was brief; on June 19, 1915, a Draft from the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Corsican* accompanied for passage to the United Kingdom by First Drafts from the 34<sup>th</sup> and the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry\*.

By the time that the main body of the 55<sup>th</sup> was to leave Canada at the end of October, Private Clarke would have been already serving on the Continent for just over two months.

(Right above: *The image of RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Corsican of the Allan Line is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)



*\*While the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group has Corsican sailing from Montreal on June 19, Private Clarke's own documents have the ship sailing from Lévis, on the St. Lawrence River opposite Quebec City. A further single source among his papers has the sailing date as June 11 – no further details appear to be recorded about any such sailings.*

After her trans-Atlantic passage, *Corsican* docked in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport on June 28. From there Private Clarke's contingent was transported by train to the fledgling Canadian Camp at Shorncliffe, adjacent to the English-Channel town of Folkestone in the county of Kent.

(continued)

**(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)**



Upon its arrival at Shorncliffe on June 29, Private Clarke and his draft were *taken on strength* by the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Training (Reserve) Battalion. They remained with this unit for the following two months as they prepared for *active service* on the Continent.



**(Right: A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from 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)**



This further move came about on August 28-29, 1915, when Private Clarke crossed to France. Given that he had been stationed at Shorncliffe, it is very likely that he traversed the Channel from nearby Folkestone to land in the French port of Boulogne some two hours sailing-time distant.

Where Private Clarke passed the following days is uncertain. He is variously reported as joining the parent unit of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the field on September 6 and also on September 19. That still leaves at least a week unaccounted for after his disembarkation in (likely) Boulogne. At this time it may have been that there were holding camps in the area; perhaps it was at one of those that he awaited the order to report *to duty* with the 14<sup>th</sup>\*

*\*Neither is there any mention of arriving re-enforcement draft to the Battalion on either the 6<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> of September at Kortepyp on the Franco-Belgian frontier where it is recorded as being encamped on both those dates.*



**(Right: The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card)**

\* \* \* \* \*

The 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) was one of the four battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian Division which had been on the Continent - on that part of the front which ran just south of the Franco-Belgian border, the Fleurbaix Sector, and from the third and fourth weeks of March, in the area of the *Ypres Salient* - since February 15 of 1915.

(continued)

Only a bare two months after its arrival in Belgium, the Canadian Division had distinguished itself during the *Second Battle of Ypres* in the spring of 1915.

On April 22 of that year, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the Germans had released chlorine gas in front of French colonial troops at the northern end of the *Ypres Salient*. The gas had reportedly caused some six-thousand casualties in a very short space of time and provoked a rout of the stricken defenders.

The Canadians, in the line just to the right, not affected to the same degree, were ordered to fill the void left by the retreating French troops and to forestall a German break-through.

(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division just to the south of the village of Langemark stands where the Canadians withstood the German attack at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

Then in the month of May the Canadian Division had moved south over the Franco-Belgian border to serve at Festubert. This was an action fought to support a larger operation by French troops a little further down the line. The British plan of attack was less than imaginative and much of what remained of their small pre-War professional Army was shot to pieces during frontal attacks.

The Canadian and Indian troops hardly fared better, each contingent incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

*\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Preceding page: *A one-time officer in the Indian Army pays his respects to the fallen at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

On the sixth day of June the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion left its billets at Oblinghem where it had been for a week having been ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and with the same results from repeating the same mistakes – on or about June 24 the Canadian Division was retiring from the area.

(continued)



*\*Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to march to billets in or near to the community of Outtersteene, five kilometres south-west of Bailleul. From there it was to move towards and into Belgium, to the Ploegsteert Sector, just across the frontier.

Having reached the Ploegsteert area, there the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



*(Right above: Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014)*

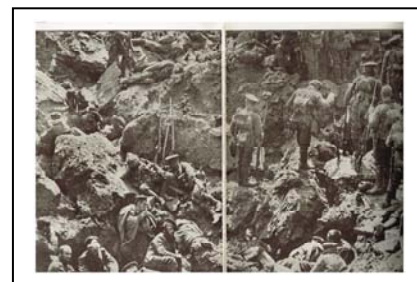
The Canadian Division was to remain in the Ploegsteerte Sector until the spring of 1916. In the meantime, in September of 1915, the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division disembarked in France and, within days, was on its way to Belgium, to serve in the sector just to the north of the Canadian Division, now designated as the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division.

The autumn of 1915 and the winter of 1915-1916 were to be a relatively quiet time with a minimum of infantry activity undertaken by either side.

Then, some ten months after Festubert, in early April of 1916, the newly-arrived Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division had undergone its baptism of fire on a large scale. It was at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, the British had detonated a number of mines under the German lines and then attacked. The newly-arrived Canadian formation was to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

*\*It had dis-embarked in France in September of 1915.*

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, and a resolute German defence greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



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

However, the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division\*, not called upon to serve in this engagement, was to spend that year – June of 1915 until June of 1916 - enduring the routines and rigours of life in the trenches\*\*.

*\*Designated thus after the arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division on the Continent.*

*\*\*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-made short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)*

During the entire period from September of 1915 until May of 1916, only two mentions of Private Clarke appear in the files: on January 8, 1916, he was awarded seven days of *Field Punishment Number 1* for disobedience, an offence committed on the previous December 11; then, in a happier vein, he was allowed an eight-day leave of absence on May 25 – to where has been left un-recorded in his files.

How much Private Clarke thus missed of what was about to happen appears not to have been documented.

From June 2 to 14, 1916, 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.



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

*(Right: The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-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.

On June 2 and 3 the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion incurred a total of four-hundred forty-eight casualties, several of them suffered by those who had volunteered to be stretcher-bearers during an attack delivered by the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

The end came on June 13 when the Canadians attacked after a ten-hour artillery barrage. They regained the positions which had been lost on the first day of the battle, June 2, and so, as the engagement closed, both sides – apart from a small loss to the Germans in the Hoge Sector – ended up where they had begun: status quo.



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

After June 3, however, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion had played no further part in the Mount Sorrel affair, surely because of its high casualty rate; from June 4 until June 16 when it moved forward into support, it spent its time in Divisional and Brigade Reserve.

Back in the trenches on June 25 for a five-day tour, the Battalion War Diarist recorded little infantry activity – one small bombing attack against enemy positions, one day-time patrol and nightly patrols; one German bombing patrol repulsed - the majority of the fifty-six casualties sustained during that period apparently due to enemy artillery action.

Only days after this episode, on June 20, Private Clarke received a promotion in the field, to the rank of lance corporal.

The month of July and the first half of August were spent following the routine of life in and out of the trenches. Then on August 11 the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to march from the area of the *Ypres Salient* to the Second Army Training Area which had been established near the large northern French centre of St-Omer. At a quarter to ten on the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> the destination was reached with the majority of the unit being billeted in the area of the not-all-that-nearby town of Hazebrouck.



(Right above: *A view of Hazebrouck, likely taken some time between the wars – from a vintage post-card*)

(continued)

The following two weeks comprised a number of different activities: sports including football, cricket and baseball; inspections; church parades; lectures; musketry; drills; physical training; working- and carrying-party duties... the list undoubtedly continues.

On the afternoon of August 27 all of this came to an abrupt end as the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched to St-Omer railway station.



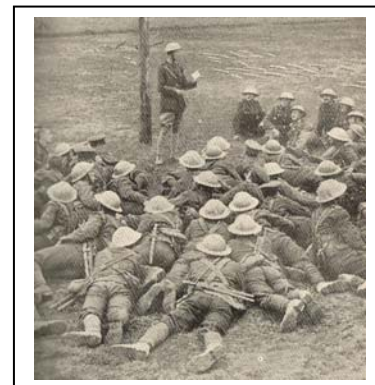
Private Clarke's unit travelled overnight from there to Conteville where it de-trained at a quarter to six in the morning. Thereupon began a six-day march: Coulonvillers; Pernois; Vicogne; Vadencourt; la Briqueterie (*Brickfields*); and finally, on September 2, the provincial town of Albert where the troops were to be billeted.

(Right above: *The once-splendid railway station in St-Omer, today in need of some overdue attention* – photograph from 2015)

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 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 those of the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day.

As the battle progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it was the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23), before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first contribution was to be in the area of two villages, Flers and Courcellette.



On the day following its arrival in Albert, the Battalion moved forward to the reserve trenches on *Tara Hill* where it remained for two further days before moving forward again to positions known as the *Chalk Pits*.

(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-Courcellette, September 1916.* – from *The War Illustrated*)

The Battalion War Diary entry of the day notes the following: *The town was deserted, as regards its civil population, with the exception of a few who had ventured back to cater to the troops who chanced to be billeted there. The Church, a pleasing structure of pressed red brick and fine building stone, very badly battered by the enemy heavy guns. Surmounting the lofty spire is the figure of the Virgin with the Child in Her arms.*

(continued)



***This at some time, had received a direct hit at its Base and is now leaning over at an angle of 120 degrees, as if to take a headlong dive to earth.***

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

While this was ongoing, Private Clarke was waging his own private battle with conjunctivitis – often today called *pink-eye*. While some of the documentation appears to be a little convoluted, the sequence of events appears to have transpired somewhat as follows: he was evacuated for treatment to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance\* at Vadencourt on September 5 from where he was forwarded on the same day to the New Zealand Stationary Hospital in the city of Amiens.

***\*The 1<sup>st</sup> CFA was at the time responsible for the running of the Corps Rest Station to where were sent minor problems and also some of those recuperating or, as the name suggests, simply in need of rest. On September 8 a section of the 4<sup>th</sup> CFA took over these duties***

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

A subsequent report has Private Clarke then being returned to the 1<sup>st</sup> CFA on September 7 before being forwarded on to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance\* (see immediately above) on September 8 - from where he was promptly returned to the New Zealand establishment at Amiens. Five days following this, on the 13<sup>th</sup>, he was discharged, reporting *to duty* with the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion *in the field* a day later again, on September 14.

In the meantime, on September 6, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered to relieve several Canadian units at Mouquet Farm. During the attempt to occupy these positions, the unit had been subjected to heavy gun-fire which caused numerous casualties. Once the relief had been completed the Germans decided to attack and, although they were repulsed, the Canadians suffered further losses. By the time of its relief in turn on September 8, only two days later, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion had counted one-hundred ninety-nine casualties all told.

***\*In this instance, to effect the transfer he was possibly not even required to leave his quarters.***

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

**(continued)**



September 15 was the day on which the Canadians attacked in the area of the ruined villages of Flers and of Courcellette, the first major confrontation for the Canadians during 1<sup>st</sup> Somme. However, by nine o'clock in the morning of that day, Private Clarke had just marched to billets in the small community of La Vicogne where his Battalion was to spend the remainder of the day at rest.

In fact, until September 23 the unit changed billets on several occasions, putting many kilometres in its collective boots before arriving at the large camp at the Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) where the succeeding days were spent in various – and numerous – drills. On the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> it moved into Brigade Support positions and by the 25<sup>th</sup> was in the front line readying for the assault of the next day.



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

The so-called *Battle of Thiepval Ridge*, part of 1<sup>st</sup> Somme, was an operation involving both British and Canadian forces. The role of the Canadian Corps was to advance to the right of the British, thus protecting that flank from any German counter-attack.

The objective of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a German-held trench system known to the Canadians as *Kenora Trench*. The attack by the infantry began at half-past twelve on September 26 aided by – the War Diary suggests possibly *hindered* by – a machine-gun and artillery barrage.

The first objective was taken in thirty minutes and the German trench was occupied some fifty minutes later again. The remainder of the afternoon was spent in consolidating the captured positions.

(Right: *Regina Trench Cemetery – Regina Trench was adjacent to Kenora Trench – and some of the ground on which the Canadian battalions fought in the autumn of 1916 – photograph from 2015*)



As was their practice, the Germans delivered several counter-attacks to re-take *Kenora Trench*. The Canadians repelled three of these on that afternoon but the enemy persisted with artillery fire and, after dark, with bombing (grenade) attacks and with enfilading machine-gun fire from a weapon which had been installed on the right-hand flank of the newly-won Canadian trenches. It was decided to retire from this untenable position\*.



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

(continued)

*\*In the hours that followed, the Canadians re-took Kenora Trench but were once more driven out of it. A third attempt was ordered but on this last occasion the attacking force was unable even to reach the position. It thus retired. This entire operation cost the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion a total of three-hundred seventy-four casualties.*

The son of Isaac Clarke and Jessie Clarke (also née Clarke, deceased January 31, 1917) of Victoria Village, Carbonear, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Elizabeth, to Isaac, to Eleazer and to Selina.

Private Clarke was reported as having been *killed in action* on September 26, 1916, fighting during the *Battle of Thiepval Ridge*.

Elihu James Clarke had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and six months: date of birth on his enlistment papers, October 6, 1892. However, the monument to him (right) records his *death* at age twenty-two.



*(Above right: A family memorial to the sacrifice of Private Elihu Clarke stands in the United Church Cemetery in the community of Victoria, Newfoundland.)*

Private Elihu James Clarke was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).

