



Private Wilcox Spracklin (Number 415345) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 10.

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

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as being that of a *clerk*, Wilcox Spracklin appears to have left behind him little information of his early life prior to his departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland. This emigration is documented in the 1921 Canadian Census – original - as having taken place in 1904. However, on a passenger list – original – of the SS *Bruce* sailing from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, the date on a partially illegible page is to be perceived ...ary 21/09 - yet *Ancestry.ca* cites the date as of this crossing – in First Class - as November 14, 1908\*. There appears to be no confirmation elsewhere of any one of those three dates.

*\*On the passenger list are the names of the parents, of Wilcox Jr. and of siblings Eva and George; youngest brother Chesley is not documented. He may not have crossed until 1919 – but neither is this confirmed.*

The Spracklin family was now to settle in North Sydney; the father – also having been baptized as *Wilcox* – had been station-master – one presumes with the *Reid Newfoundland Company* – in Whitbourne, and it may well be that he had like employment in North Sydney, although the records document him simply as *agent*. But from that time on, until the time of his enlistment, the oldest son, Wilcox Spracklin the younger, appears to have bequeathed us with no further details of his doings.

His first pay records document that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Spracklin for his services on August 4 of 1915; they also show that the unit by which he was *taken on strength* – the proceedings having taken place in the industrial of Sydney, Cape Breton, on that same day - was the 40<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia*)\*.

*\*His first medical report has the day of his enlistment as August 12 but this is surely incorrect.*

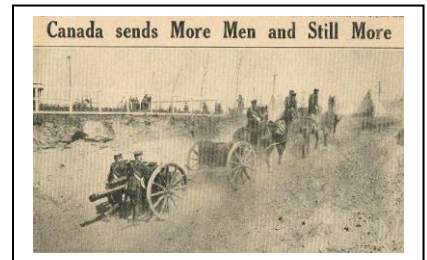
That first medical examination – a procedure undergone on August 13, a week and two days later – and also at Sydney - found him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. He was thereupon, on that date, attested by an officer, a Major Ditmars, of the 40<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion.

It is likely that after his enlistment, medical examination and attestation at Sydney, Private Spracklin was ordered to be sent directly to the military complex of *Valcartier Camp* to the north of the city of Québec where he was then to undergo the remaining formality of the enlistment process\*. This last exercise, however, did not transpire until October 16, only two days before the unit's departure for overseas. At that time the Officer Commanding the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.G. Vincent, declared – on paper – that...*Wilcox Spracklin...having finally been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

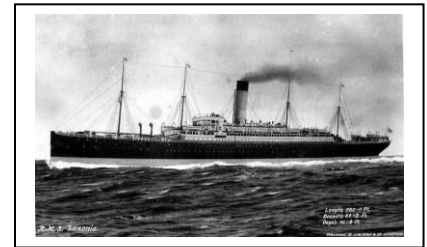
*\*The 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been mobilized on May 11 of 1915 at Camp Aldershot in Nova Scotia and had undergone its early training there, but it had then been relocated to Camp Valcartier in Québec on June 21. Thus as suggested above, it must surely have been that Private Spracklin travelled there, to Québec, immediately post-enlistment.*

(continued)

(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 – but also at some distance 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*)*



Two drafts from the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion had already sailed before the parent unit itself crossed the Atlantic, but these forces were seemingly employed upon arrival in England as reinforcements for other units already serving on the Continent. It was on October 18, 1915, that Private Spracklin and the main body of the Battalion took ship in the port of Québec – in the company of the 41<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry – embarking onto His Majesty’s Transport *Saxonia*\*.



*\*For some six months during the early days of the Great War, the vessel had served to accommodate German prisoners of war. In March of 1915 she then had reverted to service as a troop transport.*

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

The vessel sailed on the same date, to dock in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport ten days later, on October 28. Private Spracklin’s 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion was then transported by train to the fledgling Canadian military camp then being established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which latter community the camp owed its name - in the southern English county of Hampshire.



The 40<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) was apparently the first Canadian unit to be stationed there.

(Right above: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it was almost a century after the Great War – a lot less busy nowadays - photograph from 2013)*



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

But for exactly how long the unit and Private *remained* posted at *Camp Bramshott* is not clear, as neither was its destiny as a component of the Canadian Expeditionary Force at this period.

(continued)



The 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion, originally destined to be a unit of 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade of the soon-to-be 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, was soon to become re-designated as a reserve battalion\*. When this eventually transpired, the unit was then to be transferred to the Kentish coast, to *Shorncliffe*.

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

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



(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*)

As seen above, when exactly this transfer to Kent was to come about is not clear, but the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion was still at in the county of Hampshire during the final days of the first month of the New Year, 1916, for it was on January 17 that Private Spracklin was to become known to the Battalion authorities when he decided not to appear for *reveille* at seven-thirty on the morning of that day – for this misdemeanour he was *confined to barracks* for ten days.

The incident is recorded as having taken place at *Camp Bramshott*.

But the transfer was to occur *before* February 22 as a further soldier of the Battalion, hospitalized, then discharged on February 22, according to *his* own files, reported *to duty* with the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion at *Shorncliffe*, the large Canadian military complex by then established in the area of the Dover Straits in the county of Kent.

*Cæsar's Camp\** was, as were several other camps, a subsidiary of that aforementioned Canadian military establishment which had seen the arrival and departure through its gates of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division on its way to the Continent in September of 1915. It was then also to witness the transfer of units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division during the autumn of 1915 and the winter which followed as they left England through the nearby harbour and town of Folkestone, to disembark some two hours later in Boulogne on the French coast opposite.



(Right above: *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*)

*\*As may be surmised, it is thought to be the site of his first encampment when Julius Cæsar arrived in Britain some two thousand years before Private Spracklin.*

On March 18 of 1916, Private Spracklin was in need of medical attention and thus was to begin a long saga which was to terminate only at the end of January of the following year - although it is a tale of two unrelated problems.

The first condition was venereal with a secondary condition of balanitis for good measure for which he was sent on the above date to Barnwell Hospital, a specialized facility set in the outskirts of the university city of Cambridge and apparently surrounded by barbed wire to discourage the patients from upsetting the local population by visiting the community.

The first treatments lasted until on or about April 13 when he was pronounced to be *cured* whereupon he was returned to report to *Shorncliffe*. However, any jubilation would have been premature: on April 16 he reported to the Military Hospital there and on the morrow was back at Barnwell with the same problem. On this second occasion he was to remain for further treatment for the next seventy-five days.

On August 1 Private Spracklin was transferred to a second hospital in the Cambridge area, Cherryhinton, which also specialized in venereal conditions and which was also to be found outside the city limits. Three weeks and two days later he was again released, again back to his unit at *Shorncliffe*; there was to be no further venereal problem.



(Right: *The camp's gymnasium at Shorncliffe which may still be standing – its fate was unclear at the time – photograph from 2016*)

Back to duty though now he was, the episode of Private Spracklin's enforced absence was not yet over: for him, as for many other soldiers in the British and Commonwealth Forces, there was now a financial price to pay.

Venereal disease was frowned upon by certain sectors of the public, thus by certain politicians and thus by the military hierarchy. Therefore there existed a policy that hospitalized soldiers be deprived of a percentage of their already meagre pay and of the entirety of any allowances, this ostensibly to compensate for the medical attention received\*.

*\*It is apparently true to say officers were often favoured as their diagnoses at times were submitted as NYD (Not Yet Determined) or PUO (Pain of Undetermined Origin). Thus both financial retribution and social stigma were often avoided.*

According to Private Spracklin's pay records, he was to forfeit fifty cents of his daily pay of one dollar, plus his ten cents per diem field allowance. Given that he had received hospital care – for his venereal problem – for a total of one-hundred thirty-two days, he was to forfeit seventy-nine dollars and twenty cents.

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And then there was to be appendicitis: Admitted into the *Moore Barracks Military Hospital* on October 29, 1916, he was deemed to be *seriously ill* and an immediate operation was undertaken. His intestine apparently burst during the procedure and the inevitable complications – compounded in those days before anti-biotics – set in. It was not to be until November 11 that he was removed from that status of *seriously ill*.

On November 28 Private Spracklin was transferred to the coastal area of the county of East Sussex where he was admitted into the Canadian Military Hospital in – or in the vicinity of – the peace-time resort town of Hastings. There he was to remain for convalescence until January 25 of the New Year, 1917.

While in hospital at Hastings, in an office elsewhere, Private Spracklin was being transferred on paper: on January 4, the 26<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) officially came into being back at *Shorncliffe*. On that same date, Private Spracklin was *struck off strength* from his previous unit, the 40<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion, and placed on the nominal roll of that fledgling 26<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion.

Only days later again this formation was physically transferred to the Canadian military complex of *Camp Bramwell* which is where Private Spracklin reported *to duty* after his convalescence – and perhaps after the customary nine-ten day furlough granted to military personnel released from hospital in the United Kingdom.

Exactly three months after his discharge from hospital, on April 25-26 of 1917, he took ship – likely passing through the English south-coast port of Southampton and the industrial port-city of Le Havre on the French side – and crossed to the Continent.

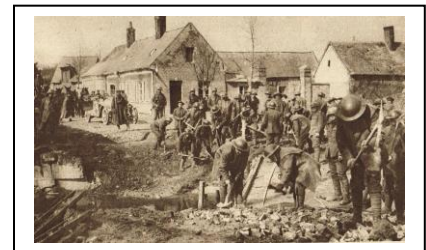


(Right: A view of the French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

Once at Le Havre it was not far – a distance usually undertaken on foot – to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles which, understandably, was also known as *Rouelles Camp*. Private Spracklin was one of three-hundred sixteen re-enforcements to arrive at Rouelles from England on that April 26.

He was now to spend the next eighteen days there before, on May 13, being despatched to temporarily report to, not his new unit, but to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Entrenching Battalion\*. In the meantime, while at *Rouelles Camp*, on May 2 he had been *taken on strength* by the Royal Canadian Regiment, this to be the unit with which – after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Entrenching Battalion – he was to spend the rest of his all too short military career.

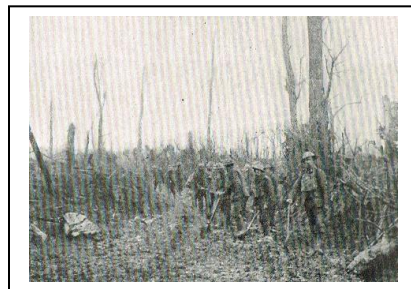
One-hundred thirty-one *other ranks* left Rouelles on that day to join various Canadian units. It appears that Private Spracklin was one of just four of them to report to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Entrenching Battalion.



(continued)

**(Preceding page: A Canadian working-party repairing a road in the village of Ham after the detonation of a mine by the retiring Germans – from *Le Miroir*)**

***\*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 reinforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.***



**(Right above: *Unspecified Canadian troops engaged in road construction, this also being a task to which entrenching battalions were assigned. – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration**)**



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

Pipe-laying, excavation of a reservoir, road-building and light-railway construction appear to have been Private Spracklin's lot in life for the four weeks less a day that he was to be attached to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Entrenching Battalion. On May 9 he was to be one of seventy-eight(?) men forwarded to various units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division; he apparently then arrived with his new unit, the RCR Battalion, later on the same May 9.

\* \* \* \* \*

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 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the newly-forming but not yet active 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division.

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The RCR\* as part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade had then been transferred to the Continent on November 1 of 1915. The unit was eventually to serve with the aforementioned fledgling 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division\*\* which, when having come into being, was to be sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area in tandem with the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. Unlike the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions and, later, the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.*

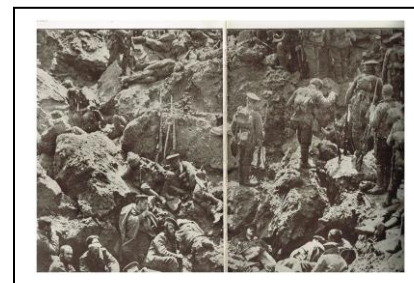
The first months of 1916 had been relatively peaceful for the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in the frontier area. It was to be in March, 1916, that the entire Division had been transferred to the *Ypres Salient*, a lethal place at the best of times, to an area to the south-east of the 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, in a neighbouring sector to the south of Ypres, which was to receive the attention of the German Army for a few days. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division this period was not to be as tranquil as that being experienced elsewhere during the same time by the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 had excavated 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.



(continued)



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

**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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.**

**However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 artillery duels some 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 of 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. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, 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-west 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 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 below: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014)***

**(Right below: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres: The area today is protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014)***

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, with the other units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, on this occasion for special training in ‘*open warfare*’.

The Canadians were about to travel 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 had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of just four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

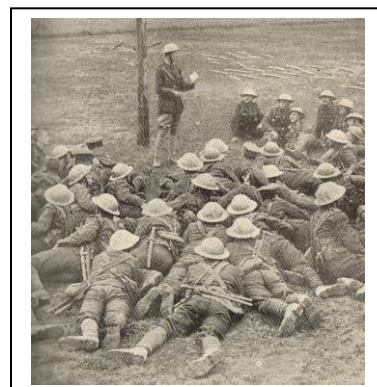


(Preceding page: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near to the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)

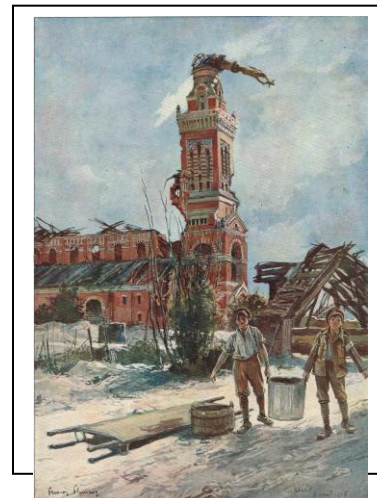
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so 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 Courcellette.

(Right: *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*)



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



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 had been withdrawn, the RCR was to have incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties and the *Zollern Graben* was still in German hands.

Three weeks later, another major action was to follow: the attack of October 8-9 on the *Regina Trench* system had not been a success but, on the contrary, 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 24<sup>th</sup> 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.

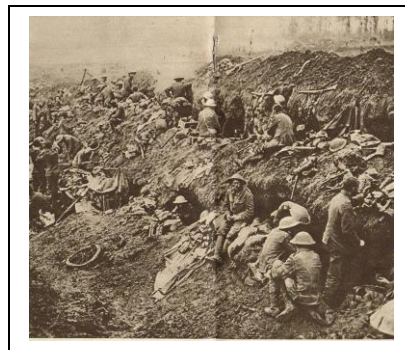
(Right: *Canadian soldiers while off-duty perusing the program of an upcoming concert 'somewhere on the Continent' – from Le Miroir*)



*\*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: 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 due to German artillery – some two-thirds of casualties on the *Western Front* were due to artillery action - and snipers.



The medical facilities during this period were kept much more busy by cases of sickness and particularly dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.

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

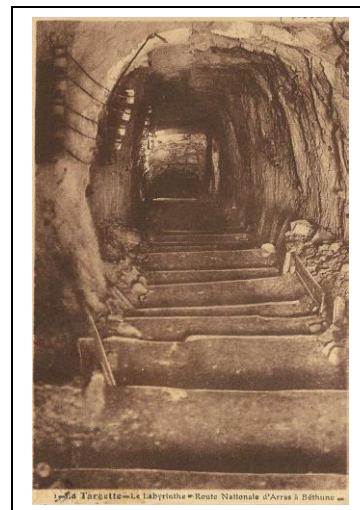
Then in February the unit had been ordered into Divisional Reserve at Bruay where it had begun five weeks of training for the upcoming British offensive; not that it had been all work: the War Diary reports sports events and concerts among the litany of parades, lectures, marches, drills, work-parties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



*(Right above: 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 58<sup>th</sup> 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 personnel were to pass down to the men under their command.



(Preceding page: *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*)

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...

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.



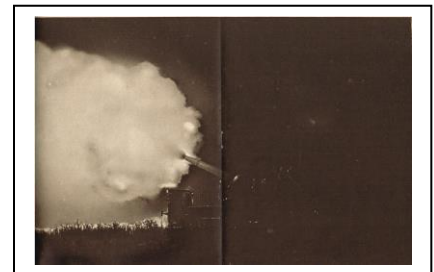
The men of the RCR were to remain underground for well over twenty-four hours.

(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.

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

*\*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 – see above - 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.*



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 had proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

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

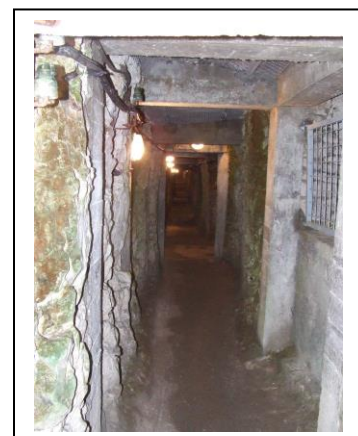


On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous, entity, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right below: *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 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> 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*)



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 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division – of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, whose objective had been *Vimy Ridge* itself, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions – the latter with that aforementioned British brigade under its command - having had responsibility for objectives on the right-hand side of the main slope\*.

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

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; the evacuation the wounded was another problem as an over-worked road and railway system found it difficult to respond to all demands.



(Right above: *The railway advances in the wake of the troops on Vimy Ridge and, 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 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions which were serving in sectors from 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.



(Right above: *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*)

The British High Command\* had long since by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from *that* area, it had also ordered operations – raids, both minor and major - in the sectors of Canadian responsibility running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.

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

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



(continued)

*\*It should be remembered that during the Great War the British High Command was in control of not only its own troops but also those from all the British Dominions, colonies and territories.*

It was during this period, exactly two months after the attack on *Vimy Ridge*, that Private Spracklin, one of a detachment of forty *other ranks*, had arrived to report from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Entrenching Battalion. On that June 9 the RCR Battalion had been in the aftermath of a raid undertaken on the evening before on German positions in the *Avion Sector* just to the south of the city and mining-centre of Lens.

However, the unit was to be relieved on the night of June 9-10 and it was likely on that latter date that the newcomers had been attached to their new Company and had commenced their duties.

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



\* \* \* \* \*

No further raids appear to have been mounted by the RCR Battalion in the weeks which followed, thus Private Spracklin's introduction to the sharp end of the *Great War* appears not to have been a traumatic experience. It was to be a period of the routines and rigours described in preceding pages, but much of it at this time spent in the rear areas.

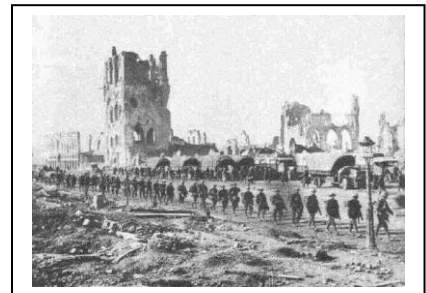
On August 15, a major attack was to be launched by troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in the suburbs of the mining-centre and city of Lens and just to the north, at a small rise known to Canadian history as *Hill 70*. The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion, however, was not a part of this particular offensive and on that day was in fact busy in training at LaPugnoy.

As far as anything of military importance on that day was concerned, the Battalion War Diarist was sparing with his ink: *Nil*.

The Canadian efforts had apparently been planned to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium had been proceeding less well than anticipated and the High Command was by now beginning to look for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses.

The Australians and New Zealanders, and then the Canadians in turn had been ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadian Corps was to be obliged to abandon its own plans.

It was to be just over seven weeks after the capture of *Hill 70*, on October 6, that Private Spracklin's Royal Canadian Regiment had begun to make its way on foot and by train to the area of the Franco-Belgian border. Later that day the unit had been billeted in the northern French town of Bailleul.



(continued)



**(Preceding page: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)**

**But it was not to be until October 23, more than two weeks later again, having travelled in a circuitous route, still on foot and by train, that the RCR was to find itself in the war zone of the *Ypres Salient*.**

**Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign into which the Canadians were about to be thrust – already ongoing since the last day of that July of 1917 – was to become better known to history as *Passchendaele*, having usurped that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army’s objectives.**



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

**From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray, it was they who had shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which had spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in reserve.**



**(Preceding page: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians stands in the south-west outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale). – photograph from 2010*)**

**From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 (various sources cite other dates) - the reverse had been true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.**



**From that aforementioned October 23 until the end of the month, Private Spracklin’s Battalion had been in reserve in the area of Sin Jaan (*St-Jean*), having contributed personnel to carrying-parties, working-parties and stretcher-parties.**

**On October 30 it had been ordered forward and was to be involved peripherally in an attack by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.**

**(Right above: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument. – photograph from 2010*)**

**Extract from the RCR War Diary entry for October 31, 1917: *Day fine and fairly quiet. The following moves and reliefs were carried out. Battalion Headquarters moved to WATERLOO Pill Box... ½ “A” Company and “C” Company moved from reserve to POMMERN CASTLE AREA taking over from 116<sup>th</sup> Battalion. “B” Company moved from the front line to old jumping off trench.***

**...2 other ranks killed in action.**

**...19 other ranks wounded in action.** There is no mention made of any *missing in action*.

The unit then had remained in the lines until having been relieved on November 4 – all of this at a cost of two-hundred fifty-eight casualties.

But by that time, Private Spracklin had played his role to its conclusion.

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

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

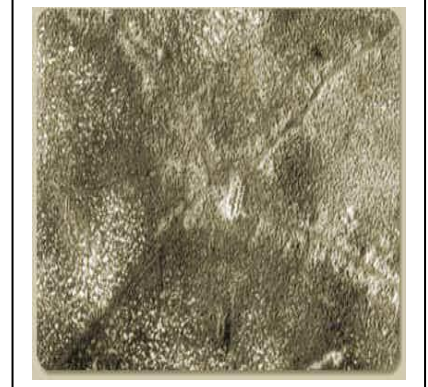
The son of B. Wilcox Spracklin\* and of Annie Spracklin (née *Whelen* (sic), deceased by 1921) of Whitbourne, Newfoundland before North Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia – the couple married on November 26, 1891 – he was also oldest brother to Eva (died at age 15 in 1912), to George and to Chesley.

*\*To whom in a will dated February 13, 1916, he had bequeathed his all and also to whom, as of September 1 of 1917 he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars a month from his pay.*

Private Spracklin was at first reported as *missing in action* on October 31, 1917, while serving in the *Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele*. It appears to then have been eight months afterwards, on July 6 of 1918, that he was...*for official purposes, presumed to have died on or since 31/10/17.*

Wilcox Spracklin had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years and ten months: date of birth at Whitbourne, Newfoundland, October 4, 1895 (from attestation papers and *Ancestry.ca*)

Private Wilcox Spracklin 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 24, 2023.