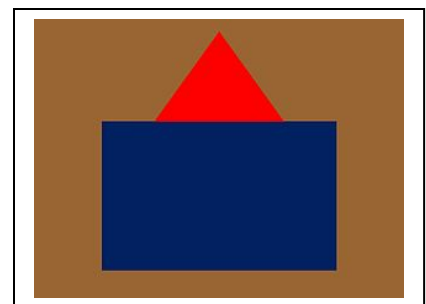




Private Eleazer Steele, Number 415621 of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Dickebusch New Military Cemetery: Grave reference J.1.B..

(Right: The image of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)

(continued)



His occupations prior to military serving record as those of *labourer* then *miner*, Eleazer Steele was quite likely the young man found on the passenger list of the SS *Ivermore* making its crossing of the Cabot Strait from Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on July 20, 1911.

Little more information appears to be available of either his early years in Newfoundland or of those in Canada after that summer of 1911. All that may be said with any certainty is that Eleazer Steele was present in the coastal town of Yarmouth in March of 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

His first pay records and also a medical document show that it was on the tenth day of the aforesaid month in the community of Yarmouth, that the Canadian Army began to recompense Private Steele for his services to the 40th Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force by which unit he was *taken on strength* on that same date.

Thirty-one days later, on April 10, and still while in Yarmouth, Private Steele underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. This was followed two days later again, on April 12, by his attestation and, on that same date, by the conclusion to the formalities of his enlistment.

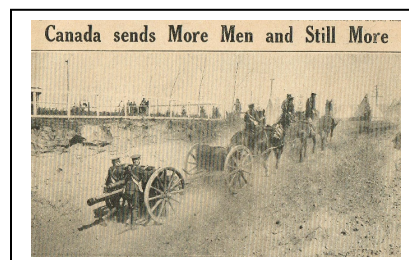
A junior officer of the 40th Battalion and also its Commanding Officer, Major A.G. Vincent – soon to be Lieutenant-Colonel – were both present for the occasion, and both declared – on paper – that...*Elezer (sic) Steele...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

This last act, as previously noted, had taken place at Yarmouth. In fact, a whole detachment of recruits had been by then raised in the area and, while this is only speculation on the part of the author, it is likely that these new soldiers would have undergone any training of that winter and early spring in, and in the vicinity of, the town itself.

May 11 was the date on which the 40th Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) officially mobilized and it did so at the Canadian military complex of *Camp Aldershot** in Kings County. Which was where it was to undergo training until June 21 when the unit was re-located to *Camp Valcartier* to the north of Québec City.

**There were two other camps by that name in operation at the time which would have been known to at least some Canadian military personnel, even though neither of the two was in Canada: Camp Aldershot was a British Army establishment in the county of Hampshire; and the second of that name was a temporary affair on the Franco-Belgian frontier not far removed to the north of the town of Nieppe.*

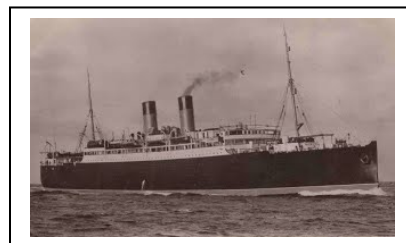
(Right: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within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



It was to be twelve weeks less a few days later that Private Steele boarded the vessel *Missanabie* for the trans-Atlantic voyage to the United Kingdom. The 40th Battalion was to travel in three detachments: a first re-enforcement draft in June of 1915, with a second draft and the parent body taking ship in Montreal within days of each other, on October 9 – although some source cite October 8 - and 18 respectively.

Private Steele was a soldier of that 2nd Draft of just fewer than three-hundred. Also taking passage on the vessel from Montreal was the 8th Canadian Mounted Rifles Regiment while boarding in the Port of Québec were to be the 12th CMR Regiment as well as the 3rd Draft of the 79th Canadian Infantry Battalion.

(Right: Missanabie was a requisitioned ship of the Canadian Pacific Ocean Services Limited, and was employed as a troopship. Her sister ship, Metagama, also a large ocean-liner, was at times to carry Canadian forces personnel but as part of her commercial ocean crossings. Missanabie was eventually torpedoed and sunk on September 9, 1918.



The image is from the Holyhead War Memorial web-site.)

Missanabie docked in the English south-coast naval port and facility of Plymouth-Devonport on October 18. From there it would seem that the 2nd Draft was transported to the Canadian complex of *Shorncliffe*, on the Dover Straits and in the county of Kent. Perhaps it was then and there put into quarantine for a number of days as a precautionary measure as, only days later again, on November 3, the draft was absorbed by the 17th Canadian Reserve Battalion which was at that point stationed at *Shorncliffe*.



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

Private Steele's 2nd Re-enforcement Draft was, as the designation implies, intended to supply personnel to other units which most likely were already serving on the Continent at the time. It was a fate which was to befall most of the infantry battalions and re-enforcement drafts which crossed to the United Kingdom.



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

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

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

While Private Steele was serving at Shorncliffe with the 17th Reserve Battalion, there occurred a series of misdemeanours on his part which, if nothing else, served to make him known to the unit's authorities: 2 days CB (Confined to Barracks) Absent Tattoo Roll Call 5/11/15; 3 days ditto ditto 7/11/15; 2 days pay A.W.L. (absent without leave) 14/12 to 16/12/15; and 2 days FP #2 (Field Punishment) for being drunk in Hythe 7/1/17.

Less than two weeks after this final incident, on the night of January 19-20 of the New Year, 1916, Private Steele was on his way to France. Having passed through the harbour in the nearby town of Folkestone and the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite, by the end of the latter date he had reported to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, in close proximity to the industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine.



He had been one of a...Draft of 705 other ranks and 8 Conducting Officers arrived from Shorncliffe (Extract from the Rouelles Camp – Base Depot – entry for January 20, 1916).



(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)

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

On the following day Private Steele was transferred sick and admitted into the nearby 9th Stationary Hospital at Le Havre.



(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)

The diagnosis at the time of his admission on January 21 had been NYD (Not Yet Determined); it was not long afterwards, however, that his problem had been determined to be of a venereal nature. Perhaps it was not, however, too serious as Private Steele remained there under medical care for only eighteen days before having then been discharged on February 8 to the Number 1 Base Details Camp also in the vicinity of Le Havre.

He served at the Details Camp for exactly five weeks until March 14 – 1916 was a Leap Year – when he was posted to the Canadian Base Depot at nearby Rouelles for the next three days. On the 17th Private Steele was despatched from there to report to duty with his unit which he did, two days later again, on February 19.

Back to duty though now he was, the saga of Private Steele's enforced absence was not over: for him, as for many other personnel 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 all of any allowances 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.*

Private Steele's *Active Service Form* shows that this was to happen in his case: he forfeited fifty cents of his single dollar per day pay and was also to be deprived of his ten-cent daily Field Allowance for the period of hospitalization - January 22 to February 8 inclusive – a total of ten dollars and fifty cents.

As has been seen, Private Steele joined the 25th Battalion on March 19. He was not alone: the 25th Battalion War Diary records that a re-enforcement draft of forty-nine *other ranks* arrived in Belgium (see below) on that same date – thus he was likely among that number.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some six months by the time of Private Steele's arrival at his new unit, since mid-September of the year 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front*.

(Right below: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could indicate any unit in British uniform – including from the Empire (Commonwealth). This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet.* – from a vintage post-card)

Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25th Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2nd Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. These were in the areas forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel, in that small part of the country which had not by then been occupied by the Germans, and to the south of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916. That period, for the most part calm, was nonetheless to be interspersed with two infantry engagements, in April and in June, and as noted in a not-distant previous paragraph, by the arrival at the Battalion of Private Steele on March 19.

* * * * *

It was not to be long before Private Steele was to experience the inconveniences of existence in the trenches* of the Great War. On March 20, less than twenty-four hours after he had reported to the Battalion, the unit moved back up into the forward area.

Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary for March 20, 1916: *Battalion relieved the 24th, 7 O.R. Wounded. Enemy artillery quiet. M.G. and rifle fire active. A few bombs & grenades fell into our front line, 7 O.R. Wounded. Our grenade platoon fired 27 grenades with good effect.*

**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.

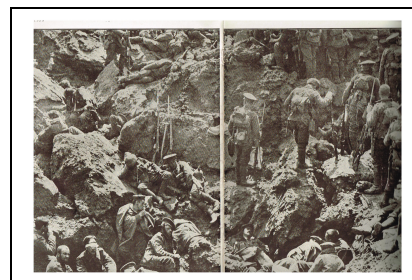
(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

Private Steele's first tour was to last a week before the 25th Battalion was withdrawn into Brigade Reserve in the rear area. It was at this point that his somewhat perturbed military history continued to run its course a little further, witness the following extract from his *Active Service Form: 29/3 Awarded 28 days FP # 1 for Drunk in town about 5.15 P.M.*

Whether the following incident affected the implementation of this punishment appears not to have been recorded.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It took place at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British detonated a series of mines beneath the German lines and then followed this up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and to consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, then greeted the newcomers who were to take 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.



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

Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25th Battalion had relieved another Canadian unit in craters and new trenches, and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date.

On the night of April 25-26 the 25th Battalion relieved the 18th Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front lines. Judging from the Battalion War Diary entries, the days that were to follow had been lively; there was no concerted infantry action report except for the habitual patrolling which may be taken from granted, but a number of casualties were to be sustained due to the heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire*.

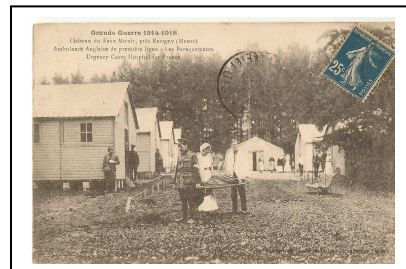


**It is estimated that between sixty and seventy per cent of all casualties on the Western Front during the Great War were inflicted by shell-fire.*

(Right above: *German bunkers from the period of the Great War, today serving as cattle-shelters, are still to be found a century later in the area of Sint-Elooi (St-Éloi), Belgium. – photograph from 2015*)

April 27 was to be no exception to this rule: *3 O.R. Wounded by shell fire. 1 O.R. Killed. All possible energy devoted to improving front line trenches, dugout, wiring etc.*

One of those wounded, Private Steele was evacuated from the front-line area and was taken to an Advanced Dressing Station, operated at the time by personnel of the 5th Canadian Field Ambulance.



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

The son of Samuel Steele, fisherman – deceased October 18, 1901 – and of Alice Jane Steele (née *Moore*s) of Long Beach and Northern Bay, Bay de Verde, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Rachel (born 1883, likely died young), to Rachel (born 1885), to George-William, to Sarah-Elizabeth and to Matilda-Jane (these last two a twin).

To a friend, Mrs. Isaac Mitchell of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, as of February 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay.

Private Steele was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 5th Canadian Field Ambulance as having *died of wounds* on that Tuesday, April 27, 1916.

(continued)

Eleazer (*Elezer*) Steele had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-four years: date of birth at Northern Bay, Bay de Verde, Newfoundland, April 23, 1891 (from attestation papers); however, parish records and the *Register of Newfoundland Births* both cite April 16, 1890, as the day and date of his birth.

Private Eleazer (*Elezer*) Steele was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 24, 2023.