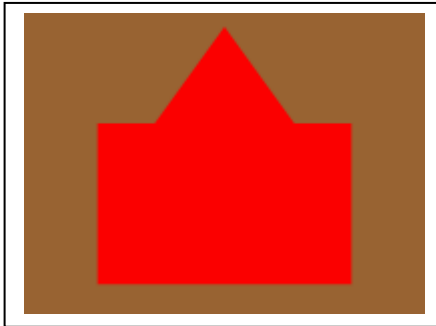




Private Henry Joseph (known as *Harry*) Steele, Number 226878 of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Duisans British Cemetery, Étrun: Grave reference, VII.A.73..

(Right: *The image of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles) shoulder-flash is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of an *ammunition worker*, *Harry Steele* appears to have left behind him no information pertaining to his early years in St. John's, Newfoundland. His parents had married in St. John's in 1880 but perhaps as early as the fall in the year 1886 they had moved to the American state of Massachusetts. They had returned to Newfoundland by 1894 and appear to have remained there until the remainder – including *Harry* - of what was to be a family of fourteen children had been born.

There appears to be little information on the family's subsequent emigration to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, although there is evidence that suggests that father Angus crossed the Cabot Strait in March of the year 1909 on board the SS *Bruce* – but nothing more. And all that may be said with any certainty of *Harry Steele* is that he was present in Toronto in January of 1917 for that was where and when he enlisted.

Although his address at the time was recorded as 38½ Cunard Street (not *Conard* as in most sources) adjacent to Halifax Common, it was at a Recruitment Depot in the city of Toronto that Henry Joseph Steele presented himself on January 17, 1917. There he underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force...*and also attested, his Oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace. At the same time he was *taken on strength* by the Canadian Mounted Rifles Depot Regiment.

The following day saw the continuation of Trooper Steele's enlistment as well as its conclusion, brought about when the Commanding Officer of the Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel W.C. Brooks, declared – on paper - that...*Harry Joseph Steele...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The CMR Depot Regiment had been organized in September of 1915 and had been based in Hamilton, Ontario, since that time; thus this was likely to where Trooper Steele was posted following the meeting with his new Commanding Officer in Toronto on January 17.

The last of the original *Canadian Overseas Battalions* by now having been – or in the process of being – sent to the United Kingdom, Depot Regiments were now taking their place. The task of these units was to reduce the time of waiting in Canada of a new recruit before his expedition to *overseas service* before which only the basic drills and the fundamentals of military discipline were to be instilled. Whereas some of the original battalions and their recruits had languished at home for months – and in some instances for a year or more – the latest recruits were often to be on their way in a matter of weeks\*.

*\*The only circumstances in that winter of 1917 which were to prevent an even more rapid despatch were the annual icing of the St. Lawrence River and the total destruction of the port and city of Halifax – Canada's major east-coast harbour – on December 6, 1917.*

(Right: Looking from the centre of the city towards what two days before had been the busy harbour of Halifax – from the Wikipedia web-site)



It was to be almost the end of April, some fourteen weeks hence, that the four officers and one-hundred fifty-two *other ranks* of the 8<sup>th</sup> Draft from the CMR Regimental Depot found itself embarking amid the shambles of Halifax onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* on April 28, 1917. The vessel sailed on the morrow.

Trooper Steele and his 8<sup>th</sup> CMR Draft were not to sail alone. Also taking passage to the United Kingdom on board the vessel were some of the last of the afore-mentioned Overseas Battalions, although many of them were far from being up to establishment strength: the 153<sup>rd</sup>, 174<sup>th</sup>, 176<sup>th</sup>, 215<sup>th</sup>, 220<sup>th</sup>, 241<sup>st</sup>, and the 253<sup>rd</sup>, as well as the Second Draft of the 205<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion and, representing the Canadian Artillery, the Number 5 Siege Battery.



(Right above: *HMT Olympic* on the right lies at anchor along with *HM Hospital Ship Aquitania*, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London)

*Olympic* docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool eight days later, on May 7. Apparently it had been a slower crossing than usual for the ship, although no reasons for that are to be found among Trooper Steele's papers – or elsewhere. Having dis-embarked, the 8<sup>th</sup> CMR Draft was transported to the county of Kent, perhaps to *Otterbury Isolation Camp* for a few days of obligatory quarantine, before then being *taken on strength* by the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion based at nearby *Shorncliffe*.



(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)

One month later again, on June 19, Private Steele\* was transferred to and *taken on strength* by another Canadian Infantry Battalion, the 119<sup>th</sup> (*Algoma*), stationed in the county of Surrey at another Canadian establishment, *Camp Witley*. The 119<sup>th</sup> was also an *Overseas Battalion* but like many others it had got no further than England and was, in April of 1918, to finally be absorbed by the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion\*\*.

\*A 'trooper' was the mounted equivalent – and still is in the forces of some English-speaking countries – of a private soldier – even though, by January 1 of 1916, the horses of the Canadian Mounted Rifles had been taken away from them.

\*\*Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have dispatched 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.

(continued)

**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.**

It is difficult to speculate why Private Steele was now at *Camp Witley* to wait a further eight months for orders to proceed to *active service* on the Continent. The casualties of *Passchendaele* were to occur that autumn and by that time the lack of man-power was becoming critical. Nevertheless, it was not to be until March 26 of 1918 that the call for the services of Private Steele was to come.

On the night of March 26-27, 1918, he crossed the Channel to report to the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Divisional) Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the area of the French coastal town of Étapes on the second of the above dates, one of only twenty-six *other ranks* to do so on that day.

There he remained for but three days before being ordered as one of a draft of some four-hundred fifty *other ranks* to the *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp* at Calonne-Ricouart at a distance of some eighty kilometres to the east of Étapes. The detachment arrived there on the following day.

There, at the CCRC, there was to be a change in Private Steele's itinerary: he had left England and had been *taken on strength* on March 28 by the 52<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*New Ontario*) which at the time was fighting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division. However, having reported to the *Reinforcement Camp* he found himself being transferred once more, now to the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles*), a component of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.

It was now to be only three further days – April 3 - before Private Steele was dispatched from Calonne-Ricouart to report to his new unit, temporarily posted to Dainville, just south-west of Arras – the CCRC War Diary records him leaving April 1, reporting April 2.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Winnipeg Rifles*) had by that time been serving on the Continent continuously for almost thirty-six months, since February 13 of 1915 – when it had disembarked from the transport ship *Archimedes* in St-Nazaire harbour - as an element of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (1<sup>st</sup>) Canadian Division\*.



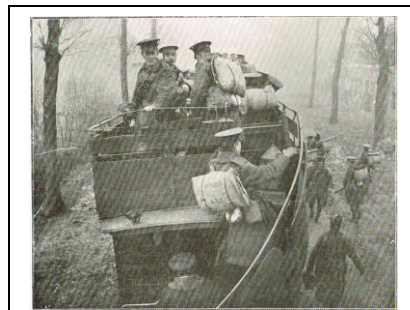
The entire Division had at first served in northern France in the *Fleurbaix Sector* just south of Armentières, before then having moved to the *Ypres Salient* in April of that same 1915.

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

(continued)

***\*Before the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was often designated simply as the Canadian Division.***

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier in busses on April 14. This transport had carried the unit as far as the village of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres, from where it had then proceeded on foot to the north-east area of the *Ypres Salient*. There it was to take over trenches from the 69<sup>th</sup> French Regiment at Gravenstal, a name soon to become a part of the Battalion's – and of Canada's - history.



Troupiers anglais emmenés en autobus vers le front.

***(Right above: Troops on their way to the front on board one of the busses requisitioned from the London area: it would appear that some have preferred to walk. – from Illustration)***

***(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - showing 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 first major action between the Canadian Division and the German Army was to occur only days later, a confrontation that has become known to history as the *Second Battle of Ypres* or as simply *Second Ypres*.

It had come about at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22 of 1915.

The *2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans in the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, with the advent of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to troops without means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine had proved overwhelming.



***(Right above: The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir)***

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



The cloud had been noticed in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left had wavered and then had broken, thus to leave the left flank of the Canadians uncovered.

(continued)

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, in the area of Gravenstafel, having been posted in trenches just to the right of the French position, had found themselves suddenly exposed to the German advance. They had held firm – just.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> the situation had become relatively stable, the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan (*St-Julien*) having remained intact until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement by both British and Canadian units in some areas had become necessary.

However, according to the War Diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, on April 25, some sixty hours after the onset of the German attack, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had still been holding its original positions. It had not been until later on that afternoon that the unit was to be relieved by British troops.

At times there had been gaps in the defensive lines but, fortuitously, either the Germans had been unaware of how close they had come to a breakthrough, or they had not possessed the means to exploit the situation.

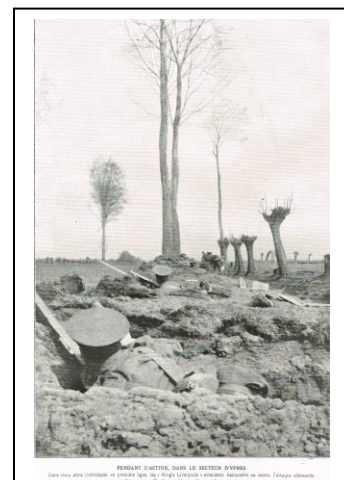
And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.

(Right: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) – at the Vancouver Crossroads - where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



As had many other units, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, had incurred numerous casualties; in the appendices of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary are to be found the following numbers: *killed in action, fifty-five; wounded, two-hundred eight; wounded and missing, forty-two; missing in action, one-hundred fifty-five; sick from fumes, one-hundred thirteen; shock, three; died from wounds, one.*

(Right: *Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which only came into use in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)



During the first six days of May the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been... *Still in reserve on Canal Bank\*... Intermittently shelled.* (Excerpt of May 1 entry of 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary)

Finally, on May 6, the Battalion was to retire the considerable distance from the northern outskirts of Ypres through the village of Vlamertinghe to the west, and as far as the area of northern French town of Bailleul where it arrived on the following day, May 7.

There it was to re-enforce and re-organize, but not until *after* that first day during which... *no work done, men allowed to sleep until afternoon...*

(continued)

***\*This was the Yser Canal which flows through Ypres and which, to the north of the city, at times became a part of the front line.***



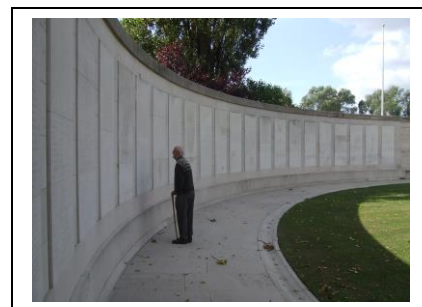
***(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion moved into defensive positions on its western bank—west is to the left – photograph from 2014)***

There had followed two weeks of rest – as restful as it ever was to get during the *Great War* – before the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered south, on May 19 and in pouring rain, further into France to fight in actions to be undertaken near places by the names of Festubert and Givenchy. The French had been preparing to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had requested British support in order to prevent the Germans re-enforcing the French front.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks were to take place in which the British High Command would manage to gain three kilometres of ground but would also contrive to destroy, through the use of the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what had been left of the British pre-War professional Army after *Second Ypres*. The Canadian Division was now also to serve during the Festubert campaign but – not contributing the same numbers of troops as the British – was logically not to participate to the same extent. It had nonetheless suffered.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had first entered the line, in reserve dugouts, in the area of Festubert on that May 20, 1915. This tour was to be of three days duration, the Battalion having then been relieved on June 22. By that time the unit had been involved in attacks against German strongpoints and had also been heavily shelled: casualties for that short period had amounted to thirty-one *killed in action* and one-hundred forty *wounded*.

A second tour had seen less ambitious attacks delivered by the Battalion which was also to supply large working parties for digging trenches; casualties had inevitably once more been incurred, although fewer in number. The unit had been withdrawn from the forward area to Essars on May 27 – to be ordered into trenches at Givenchy five days later.



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

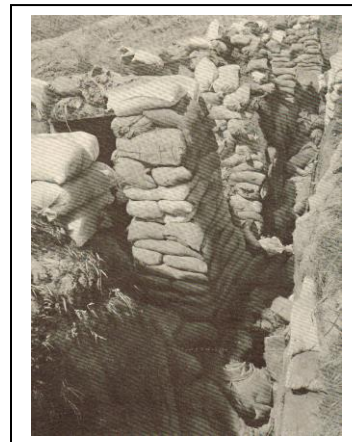
***(Right above: A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?))***

**(continued)**

(Right: *German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth captured by the French at their Pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorette –from Illustration*)

The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7<sup>th</sup> (*Meerut*) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – having employed the same suicidal tactics - was likewise to be a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing* during their campaign in the Artois region.



Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\* is a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Having been ordered into the forward trenches on June 1, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had experienced a very quiet seven-day posting there. A further three-day posting into the front line was to occur from June 17 to 19 inclusive; little infantry activity had been undertaken – although the German artillery had paid the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion a great deal of attention.

Only a single day after its retirement the unit had returned to the forward area – and once again the enemy guns were to be responsible for most if not all of the casualties incurred on this second occasion – until the night of June 22-23 when it had then retired from the field and from that particular theatre of the war.

At about the same time, over a number of days, the entirety of the units of the Canadian Division was to retire from the vicinity of Givenchy. Thus this unsatisfactory short-lived venture drew to its conclusion.

*\*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 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to march to billets in Béthune. From there it was to move northwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the *Ploegsteert Sector* on June 26, there the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had remained – as had the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it was to become 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. It had been to the vicinity of this last-named community that the unit was now posted.



(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*)

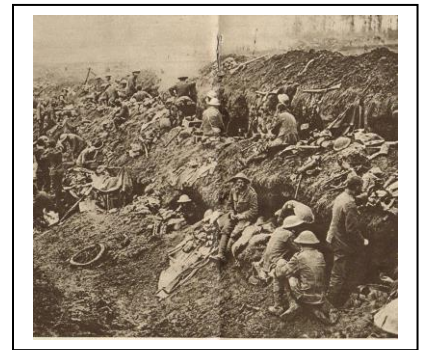


During the period of 1915-1916 now to be spent in Belgium, there were to be only two occasions on which units of the Canadian Divisions\* were required to fight concerted infantry actions – the first being the action at the *Mont St-Éloi Craters* and the second, the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* – otherwise there were to pass some fourteen months of the routines and rigours of trench warfare\*\*.

*\*The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division arrived in Belgium from the United Kingdom in mid-September of 1915; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916 – comprised of Battalions already serving on the Continent and others which were yet to arrive there; the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division was to land in France from the United Kingdom in mid-August of 1916.*

*The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions were both to be supported by British artillery for a number of months before Canadian batteries became available.*

*\*\*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.*

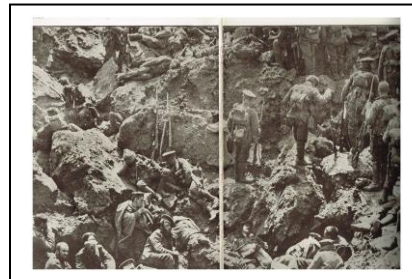
*(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)*

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entries *a propos* the autumn, winter and spring tours on the firing line report little in the way of concerted infantry action apart from the incessant patrolling - both terrestrial and aerial - and the infrequent raids; both sides had seemingly contented themselves for the most part with sniping and with artillery bombardments.

However, the grenade - often referred to as a *bomb* at that time – after more than a century of neglect, had been becoming once again an important component in the infantryman's arsenal\*, and sections in each infantry battalion were to be trained in its use.

*\*At first reduced to making his own from tin cans, nails, stones, blasting-powder, and a combustible fuse, by 1915 the soldier in the British trenches was being supplied with the familiar-looking Mills Bomb and there were troops – often in separate companies, platoons and/ or sections - who were trained to specialize in the use of them. To that simple hand-thrown device was soon to be added the rifle-grenade which offered a greater range to the weapon.*

And there had been another activity now gaining some popularity with the High Commands: mining. The inability to either go around the enemy defences or through them had led to the idea of tunnelling underneath them and destroying them with massive explosions. It was to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division which was to serve in the most important such engagement involving Canadian troops during this period.



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

The place had been in the area of the village of St-Éloi where, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of March, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then had immediately followed up with an infantry attack. The anticipated role of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division troops had then been to capitalize on the presumed British successes, to hold and to consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the often putrid weather which was to turn the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and then a resolute German defence well-served by artillery, had greeted the Canadian newcomers who had begun to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4.

Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians. Thus had concluded – officially on April 17 – the *Action of the St-Eloi Craters*.

During the period of the confrontation noted in the above paragraphs, at the beginning of April the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, uninvolved at St-Éloi, had been ordered transferred from the *Ploegsteert Sector* on the frontier, to be posted to the area of the southern outskirts of Ypres, in a sector between the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division and the newly-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisions, by this time serving in an area of the south-east of the ruined city.

Thus, now organized as the Canadian Corps, the three Divisions were to be serving side by side.

In this new situation its time, when not in the forward area, was spent by the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the vicinity of the Belgian communities of Poperinghe and Dickebusch. Those tours *in* the trenches were undertaken just to the south-east of Ypres itself: *Blauwepoorte Farm*, *Hill 60* and *Sanctuary Wood* (see further below) were apparently all familiar to the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion as well as to other Canadian units.



(Right above: *Dickebusch New Military Cemetery is the last resting-place of six-hundred twenty-four dead of the Great war; within the bounds of the nearby Extension lie a further five-hundred forty-seven. – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)

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

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.



(Right below: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood, almost in the shadow of Hill 60 – 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 were to be unable to exploit their success and the Canadians had successfully patched up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, however, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was to prove to be a costly experience for the Canadians.



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



Ten days later the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported by the artillery. The lost ground for the most part had been recovered, both sides were back where they had started – and the cemeteries were more than a little fuller.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion appears to have played little part in the earlier events of the eleven-day action, having been held in reserve in the area to the south-west of the fighting. However it had undertaken a major role in the final days of the fighting. Having moved up to the area of *Railway Dugouts* on June 12, it had moved into its assembly area late that evening; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Command had ordered the unit to re-take *Mount Sorrel* itself.



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

This it had done.

After a heavy preliminary bombardment, the final counter-attack had gone in at half-past one in the early morning of June 13. The objectives had soon been taken although the response by the German artillery during the remainder of that day and the following had been furious.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun its attack with a strength of five-hundred seventy *all ranks*: the unit's casualty count by the time of its retirement on the evening of June 14 was to be sixty-five *killed in action*, two hundred *wounded* and two *missing in action* – a number approaching fifty per cent.

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



Yet, according to the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of June 14, 1916... *There was hardly an Officer or man without some slight wound and many had wounds which required dressing and for which they should have gone to the Hospital. But the complete physical fatigue caused by the lack of three days sleep, loss of 24 hours rations, and great nervous strain was the most marked feature on all hands. In spite of this 3 officers and 75 men volunteered to go back to Mount Sorrel on the same evening and try to carry out our wounded. This they succeeded in doing...*

On August 13 the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to begin a three-day march towards the west, to cross the Franco-Belgian frontier on its way to the British Second Army training area where it would prepare for a move to the theatre of the British summer offensive already under way to the south. Billeted in the area of the commune of Houille, it was to spend the next two weeks there.

(Right: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photographs of the real thing – 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.*

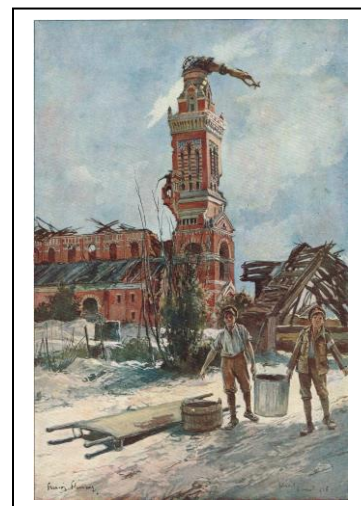
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By the end of August the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion was to be preparing for a move south, to the area of *the Somme*. On the late evening of August 27 the unit had entrained at Arcques – forty men having clambered into each of a number of reportedly... *filthy box-cars* – to travel south overnight and to arrive in the community of Candas at eight o'clock on the following morning.

The Battalion had thereupon continued the transfer to its new theatre of war on foot and, having passed through – and billeted betimes – in a number of smaller communities en route, had arrived on September 5 at *Tara Hill Camp*, just to the east of the provincial town of Albert.

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

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



On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions having been 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 that day at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

As the campaign had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette – although the involvement of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had come about towards the end of that initial Canadian offensive and was to be very peripheral (see below).

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

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun a period to be spent in and out of the trenches, much of the time in dispersed smaller units. Eight days later the unit had prepared to be transported – on this occasion by bus - to another Camp, *Brickfields*, not far removed and, logically, in the area of a brick-making industry, *la Briquetrie*.



(continued)

Two days later again and the unit had been on the move once more, to be billeted in nearby Albert. There the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion personnel was to be briefed on the happenings on the front in the Courcelette Sector where, for the most part, the Canadians had just taken a beating.



(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*)

There had followed a further two days in the forward trenches before the Battalion had then been relieved and moved back into billets in Albert on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The relief was not to last long as, on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the unit had once again moved towards the front along the Albert-Bapaume Road to take the place of the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion in the trenches.

An attack by the Canadian forces in the area having been imminent, the troops had been reported in their jumping-off positions by 1.30 a.m. of September 26. There they were to wait for some eleven hours until thirty-five minutes past noon when, following a heavy artillery barrage, they had clambered out of their positions to assault the enemy positions.

The Battalion War Diary reports that by five o'clock on that afternoon the objective of Regina Trench had been taken\* although, in other places, the initial success had been countered by the enemy. The Diarist later saw fit to include the number of casualties of the day: *killed in action*, forty-eight; *wounded in action*, two-hundred-forty; *missing in action*, one-hundred seventy-one.

(Right: *A part of Regina Trench Cemetery, Grandcourt, also showing some of the ground which was to be fought over by the Canadians – advancing from left to right - for some two months. – photograph from 2014*)



*\*The success reported in the War Diary was in fact only temporary. The position, a German earthworks, was to be attacked on four more occasions before being finally captured by troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division on November 10-11 of that same year.*

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



The Battalion was to be relieved during the evening of September 27 and the night that followed, thus it was not to be until almost five o'clock in the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> that most of the unit had taken up billets in the town of Albert.

There had been a silver lining: by *that* time, it appears that all those present – there were inevitably to be a few still to make an appearance – had been greeted upon arrival by the luxury of a hot meal.

Also to greet the Battalion was to be a re-enforcement draft of one-hundred one *other ranks* which had arrived some hours before, during the evening of September 27. Whether the newcomers had been aware of it at the time or not, having marched to *the Somme*, they were now to turn around and march away from it.

It was to be later on that September 28, at five o'clock in the afternoon after a day of rest, that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had moved on foot to new billets at Bouzincourt, a community some five kilometres distant. There may have been some among the Battalion who had at first been convinced that their Calvary on *the Somme* had drawn to an end but, alas, they were soon to be apprised otherwise.

The march was to last from September 28 until October 7 inclusive and had taken the route Albert to Bouzincourt, Bonneville, La Vicorne, Harponville, back to Bouzincourt and *the Brickfields*. During these days of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's absence – it had not been the only unit to march - a further British offensive had been launched, on October 1, with fresh battalions – some of them Canadian – having arrived to play a role. It had been to accommodate this influx that billets in and about the vicinity of Albert had been liberated and their occupants sent for a walk.

By ten minutes past eleven o'clock on the evening of October 9 the Battalion had relieved the 15<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion and had found itself back once more in the front-line trenches. This tour was to last two days only, at which time 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn, a retirement which itself was to end after three days and with the arrival of some likely not altogether welcome news.

Excerpt from 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for October 14, 1916: *2 pm – Major Mackenzie addressed officers and N.C.O's on the coming operations. Battalion moved forward via Brigade Dump where each man was equipped with 3 sandbags, 4 bombs and 1 ground flare. Relief was completed, no casualties going in...*



(Right above: *Some of the Canadian wounded of the Somme receiving preliminary medical care before being evacuated from the field to the rear area for further treatment – from Le Miroir*)

The early part of the next day was to be spent by the Battalion personnel in preparation for the imminent attack and in burying a few of the corpses still lying in the open in No-Man's-Land. And then word had been received that the units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division were not to play any role in that anticipated operation and that on the next day, once having cleaned up its trench area, the Battalion was to return to billets in Albert.

On the following day again, October 17...*Battalion with Brigade column moved to camp near Warloy arriving there at 5 pm after a good march.* If there had been any doubt in the minds of some, that had by now been dispersed: the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was now to withdraw from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

(continued)

To Talmas a goodly distance to the west, to Fienvillers not far to the north-west, to Neuville some fifteen kilometres to the north-east, to Maizières twenty kilometres to the north-east again, and finally northward for fifteen kilometres on to Diéval, this last the Battalion's at least temporary destination, where the unit arrived at one o'clock in the afternoon of October 23: this had been the semi-circular route, passing to the west of the battered city of Arras, by which the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had retired in the space of six days, having billeted in each of the above-mentioned communities.

*(Right: 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)*



Having then marched for the following five days, the Battalion – as eventually was to do the entire Canadian Corps, its final units not retiring until December - had passed into a new area which was to become more and more a Canadian responsibility.

It was from the proximity of the historic town of Béthune in the north to the vicinity of another venerable community, the city of Arras in the south, that the Corps was now to occupy – although there were still to be British forces in these sectors as well\*.



*\*This area was the major coal-producing area of France and by early 1915 two-thirds of it had been occupied by the German invaders. It may also of course be imagined that production in the un-occupied sectors were able to exploit nothing close to what had been pre-War quantities.*



*(Right: The mining village of Loos – pit-head towers may be perceived in the central background – as it was already by 1915 when it was a French responsibility – from Le Miroir)*

*Because it was an industrial region – most of France was agricultural at this time – the front line ran through or in close proximity to the myriad communities, large and small, in which before the War had lived the workers of the area and their families. Much of the ensuing fighting, therefore, in contrast to elsewhere, was in villages, towns, and in and about the city of Lens rather than in open countryside.*

The sectors to which the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion upon its arrival from *the Somme* had been posted were very much centrally located rather than to the north or south, and were not far distant from the city and mining centre of Lens. In reserve the unit was often to serve in places such as Guoy-Servins, Carency, Berthonal Wood, Villers-au-Bois and the rest area at Bruay - where the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to spend that Christmas of 1916.



(continued)



**(Preceding page: *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*)**

January, February and March were to be, for the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, very much a period of routine. Whereas many of the units of the Canadian Corps, particularly as of mid-February, would undergo extended training exercises, this was not to be the case with the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion until the first two days of April – with a third such day on the 4th.

In the meantime, for all those three months, the Battalion War Diarist has been fairly repetitive in his entries: little in the way of infantry action except the incessant patrols and the occasional raid – by both sides\*. All activity was to be local and most casualties due to German artillery and snipers - and by now the occasional raid by the enemy air force - thus up until the final day of March the unit's existence in and out of the trenches had been very much the one described on an earlier page.

*\*Only two such incidents, both minor, have been documented in the War Diary, on February 25 and 28. On the first date it was a party of thirteen all ranks, on the second a detachment of twenty-six, which had been involved: on neither occasion were any prisoners taken or casualties incurred; a total of three rifles, one French, were brought back to the Canadian lines as booty.*

The casualty rate was to be very low during this entire period of late autumn, the ensuing winter and even the first days of that spring. In fact it was to be sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, dental work - rather than the handiwork of those in the opposing trenches - which would keep the medical services busy.



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

On April 1 the Battalion had been ordered to a training area in the area of Estrée-Cauchy where...*A Brigade practice was held over a flagged course at the Training area...Men being arranged in groups representing the occupants of Dug-outs and tunnels as nearly as possible. The movements were carried out under the Brigadier.* (Excerpts from 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 1 and 2, 1917)

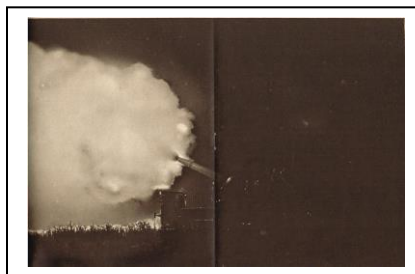
Whether the Battalion personnel had been aware of it prior to these first days of April, there must surely now have been, as of those two days of training, no doubt that the Canadians were in the imminent future to embark upon an offensive campaign: As most Canadians know, the opening day had already been scheduled for April 9 of that 1917.

The six days prior to the first attack, from the information provided by the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary, were to be a melange of final preparation and training, and of three church parades, a pay-parade, lectures to the NCOs and also to the men by the Commanding Officer, and a day on which the shooting-down of a British observation balloon – its observers to escape by parachute – comprised the entire War Diary entry.

Nevertheless, all seems to have fallen into place on the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's plate as, on April 8, Easter Sunday...*Men being equipped and getting ready to move up (to) the Line in forenoon. Battalion moved up to Assembly trenches around Lille Post, starting off at 5 p.m and picking up Rations and Equipment on the way up.* (Excerpts from 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 8, 1917)

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



*\*It should be added that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division 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 the men who had dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*

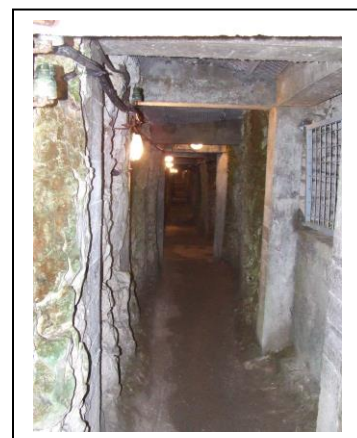
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive 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 proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *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 – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division with a British brigade under its command - had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

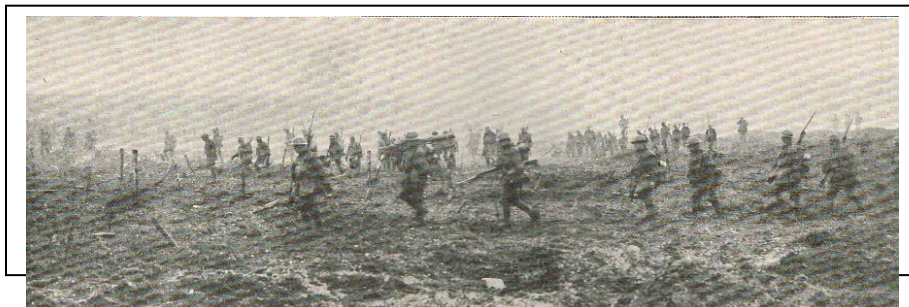


(Right above: *Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years after the attack – photograph from 2008(?)*)

(continued)

On that first day of the offensive, the Canadians had attacked on a four-Division front with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions responsible for the capture of the summit of the *Ridge* itself. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to the right as seen from behind the attackers, down the southerly slope in the area of the village of Thélus; and further to the right again was to be the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, on the slope as it continued its descent in the direction of Roclincourt and, further again, Arras.

(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*)



Excerpts from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entries for April 9 to 12, 1917: On the night of April 8-9...*The Battalion...was unable to get to the position of Assembly...until 4 a.m. Special equipment was (had been) distributed at ARIANE DUMO so that the men did not carry unnecessary loads longer than was absolutely essential. At 5.30 a.m. the assault was made by the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Can. Battalions. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion...remained in the Dug-outs and tunnels until 6.15 a.m. when they moved to their scheduled position...four parties moving forward...with 4 Stokes guns and ammunition, depositing their loads and returning to the Battalion under schedule.*

*At 8.30 a.m. a report was received...that the Operation, as far as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (of which the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a component) was concerned, had been an unqualified success...and that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was collected in the German Support Trenches...with a total loss of 26 other ranks.*

*At 2.30 p.m. (still on April 9) orders were received for the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion to relieve the three assaulting Battalions... The relief commenced immediately and was completed by 6. p.m.*

*Beyond continual reconnaissance parties and appalling weather, nothing of military interest occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11 of April. On the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup>, however, the Battalion was ordered to relieve the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the Line with a view to an advance...on the 13<sup>th</sup>.*

(Right: *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*)



This latest was to be a general advance by both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions, down the eastward side of the slope, the latter Division to take the village of Willerval, which it had then done on April 13, and to advance beyond. Having accomplished this task, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> to withdraw into the shelter of one of those aforementioned tunnels.

The total casualties for this entire period, April 9 to 16, inclusive, as recorded by the Battalion War Diarist, had been twenty *killed in action* and *ninety wounded*.

Retirement from the forward area was not often to be equated with *rest* and so it was to prove on this occasion with the troops of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion who were now to exchange their rifles for shovels and pick-axes. The atrocious weather had recently combined with the extraordinary wear and tear on the roads so as to render many of them un-serviceable\*; thus a four-day period was to be spent effecting repairs before a further subsequent six were to be spent – and perhaps even enjoyed – in the relative calm of Divisional Reserve.



(Right above: *A memorial to the fallen of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017*)

*\*There had been no attempt to capitalize on the successes of April 9 as the orders had been not to advance, but to consolidate – but in fairness it should also be said that the state of the ground because of the weather, the relentless artillery fire and over-use of the roads had made it impossible to move supplies and guns forward. Evacuating the wounded was another problem as an over-worked road and railway system found it difficult to respond to all demands.*

While the relatively short *Battle of Arras* was to *officially* last until May 15 of that 1917 – five weeks plus a day – April 30 was to be the concluding day of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's direct involvement. The unit's final act had been to serve in the operation against the German positions in front of the community of Arleux-en-Gohelle – largely successful but very costly.



(Right above: *The village of Vimy – large enough to have had a railway station – looked like this by the end of the War after a four-year bombardment by both sides. The community is to be found on the Douai Plain, overlooked by the Ridge which is about three to four kilometres distant. – from a vintage post-card*)

For the entire month of May the Battalion was to be posted to three locales to the rear: Brunehaut Farm, Estrée-Cauchy and then Haillicourt where it was to remain for twenty-seven successive days; it was not to be until June 1 that it had then been ordered elsewhere.

The *elsewhere* in question was to be in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector, adjacent to *Vimy Ridge*, a march of about twenty kilometres altogether. Three-quarters of that distance had been undertaken on the first day, June 1, the night to be spent in tents close to Mont St-Éloi\*, before most of its personnel had then moved on to the nearby villages of Neuville St-Vaast and La Targette on June 2.

*\*Not to be confused with St-Éloi in Belgium, a reference to it on an earlier page.*

On this occasion the unit had not been situated in front-line positions and the enemy's artillery and aeroplanes were to be the only manifestations of his presence in the nine days that followed. From now on, however, and particularly following that month of June which had been spent as far away from *the Front* as the Army allowed, the days and weeks were now to revert once again to the rotating grind of service both in and away from the trenches.

The British High Command had long prior to this time – even before the *First Battle of Arras* - decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert the enemy's attention – and also his reserves - from *that* area, it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



*(Right above: A further 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)*

The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort and an attack by both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in the area of Lens on August 15 had been an intended part of this late-summer campaign.



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

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

Yet it had been high enough to have been considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur William Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of Lens itself.

*(Right: This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914)*



Objectives had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of the day of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16<sup>th</sup> several strong counter-attacks were to be launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences had stood firm and the Canadian artillery, which had been employing newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* had remained in Canadian hands.

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)



For its part, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles), having moved up to the front lines on the day before, August 13, had then begun to make its way forward to the assembly positions on August 14, the day prior to the attack, stopping at numerous supply dumps along the way to avail itself of general and specialized equipment – including an ominous stock of stretchers – before having reached those assembly points.

By quarter past three on the morning of August 15, the last of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had reported having arrived at its assembly point.

Zero Hour for the assault had been scheduled for twenty-five minutes past four on that morning and, according to the War Diary...*Up to Zero & 69 (minutes after Zero hour) the operation was carried through on scheduled time, but...still according to the same source, the Barrage had not followed the agreed program and had bombarded the wrong objective.*

A change in the plans of the infantry was therefore made but its implementation was forestalled by the enemy who by now had had the opportunity to organize his resistance. To add to this, only two posts had been established by the Battalion...*both of which were, unfortunately, destroyed by shorts\* from our howitzer.*

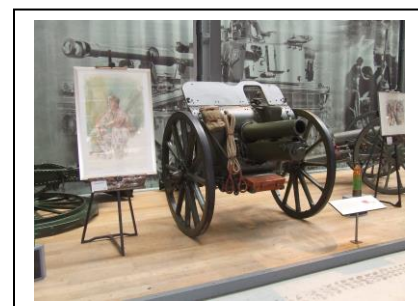
*\*A shell which, for any one of a number of reasons, falls short of its intended target, thus often among one's own troops.*

It was then that a decision had been taken to postpone any future attack until such time a new instructions had been issued by Battalion Headquarters...*as this Barrage by this time had practically ceased.*



At four o'clock that afternoon...*The Barrage came down... it is reported that tremendous execution was done, both by the Barrage\*, which by this time had been corrected to its proper height, and also by our Lewis Gunners and Snipers...*

*\*Artillery batteries were mostly equipped with 18-pounder guns, the main medium quick-firing gun of the British and Commonwealth forces during the Great War. However, one battery in four usually employed 4.5-inch – sometimes 6-inch - howitzers, firing a larger shell. Each battery had six guns.*



(Right above: *A British eighteen-pounder quick-firing artillery piece, mainstay of the British and Empire (Commonwealth) artillery forces during the Great War, here seen at the Imperial War Museum, London – photograph from 2011(?)*)

(Preceding page: *A British-made 4.5-inch howitzer which equipped some twenty-five per cent of British and Commonwealth artillery during the Great War. It is seen here in the Royal Artillery Museum – today unfortunately closed - at the Woolwich Arsenal. – photograph from 20012(?)*)

But at four o'clock there had been no attack to support. During the day the soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been dispersed and only some seventy men – surely insufficient – had been mustered for the attack. Not only this, but the information sent to this effect to the artillery had not arrived in time, thus concluding what might have been termed *A Comedy of Errors* - had it been funny.



*At 6.00 p.m. the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved in the front line, by the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion and took over the Blue Line, at which point their part in the battle ended.*

*(Most of the italicized sections in the above narrative a propos August 15 are from an Appendix entitled CAPTURE OF HILL 70; N. of LENS, 15<sup>th</sup> AUGUST...17<sup>th</sup> AUGUST, 1917, in the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary.)*

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

Apparently the Canadian offensive campaign of the summer had been planned so as to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British offensive in Belgium had been proceeding a great deal less well than expected and the High Command looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses.



The Australians, New Zealanders and then the Canadians had been ordered to prepare to move north, thus the Canadians were to be obliged to abandon any further plans that they might have had.

*(Right above: A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, hidden from aerial observation under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir)*

*At 6.00 p.m. the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved in the front line, by the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion and took over the Blue Line, at which point their part in the battle ended.*

*(Most of the above italics in the above narrative a propos August 15 are from an Appendix entitled CAPTURE OF HILL 70; N. of LENS, 15<sup>th</sup> AUGUST...17<sup>th</sup> AUGUST, 1917, in the Battalion War Diary.)*

There had therefore been no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the *Lens-Béthune Sectors* and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but also at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir*)

By August 19 the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had retired to Haillicourt where it had been posted during the month of June. A bath for all appears to have been a first priority after which training and route marches appear to have taken precedence – apart from inspections by higher-ups on the officer's ladder who apparently appeared equipped with congratulatory messages *a propos* recent events - to be added to those from even further up the scale.



Haillicourt had been succeeded by Mingoal for some – Villers-Brulin for others – Mingoal then having been the venue of a short – because of the heavy rain - visit and inspection by Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force - and Commonwealth Forces – on the *Western Front*.

(Right above: *Simply entitled 'Douglas Haig in Newfoundland', taken in 1926 during his visit for the unveiling of the National War Memorial – from the Wikipedia web-site*)

September had come as also had a return to the system of *front, support* and *reserve*. Not a great deal of offensive infantry action was to be reported during the next number of weeks but enemy planes had often put in an appearance and his artillery had been as ever busy – as apparently had also been the guns on the Canadian side, the targets of both, of course, usually the opposing infantry.



There had been, nevertheless, some lighter moments as sports were beginning to play a more and more important role in life out of the line, and itinerant theatre companies were making the rounds to raise the morale of the troops.

(Right above: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917: The use of the head-band – the Tump - to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)



(Right: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

The use of gas had been reported during the month by the War Diarist as having been frequently employed - as often by the Canadians as by the Germans. These chemicals by that time were being delivered by artillery shell and they had also evolved from the chlorine of 1914 – as at *Second Ypres* – to phosgene and mustard gas\*.

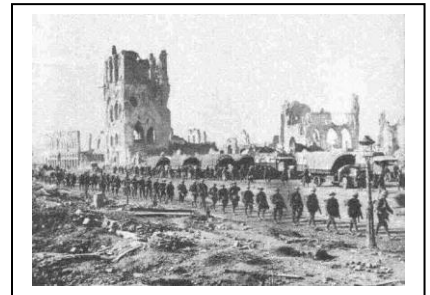
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*The former is not necessarily coloured, has an odour akin to cut hay, is an irritant of whatever it touches, and may be fatal if breathed in sufficient quantities, its effects often having a delayed reaction. Neither are the effects of mustard gas instantaneous: its smell is strong, resembling that of putrefaction and it is a blistering agent of whatever it comes into contact with; the blisters burst and then become septic. In those days before antibiotics, sufficient blistering – particularly of the lungs – was often a guarantee of a most unpleasant and painful death.*

Despite the apparent urgency of the situation in Belgium, it was not to be until October 18 that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to march from Bruay towards the north, to arrive two days afterwards in the area of Zuytpeene, a community adjacent to the larger northern French centre of Cassel, some fifteen kilometres to the west of the Franco-Belgian frontier\*.

*\*The delay in any move by the Canadians into Belgium was likely caused by the four-week halt ordered to the British campaign during the month of September, used to re-organize and re-enforce.*



It had not been until the final weeks of October of 1917 that any unit of the Canadian Corps was to become embroiled in the British-led offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having taken that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – at least ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right above: *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*)



(Right: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

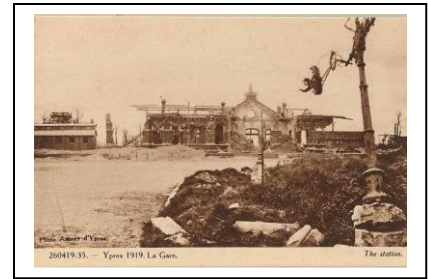
From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray, it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which had spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division finally having entered the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)

Meanwhile, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions were attacking up the slope from Zonnebeke to Passchendaele towards the end of that October of 1917, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was still marking-time at Zuytpeene.

In fact, it was not to be until November 4 that the unit had marched to Ebbingham Station from where it had taken a train to Brandhœk, a community half-way between Ypres and the town of Poperinghe, where it had encamped. Two days later again, another train had transported the Battalion to the walls of Ypres itself from where in the rain it had traversed the remnants of the city itself – as in a photograph of the previous page – to a camp at St-Jean (*Sint-Jan*) in the north-eastern outskirts.



(Right: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained: the image is from 1919. – from a vintage post-card*)

It was then on November 8 that the unit moved up into the trenches in the forward area to play its part in the next stage of the already-ongoing offensive up that slope of a kilometre or so towards – and by this time beyond – the village of Passchendaele.

Excerpts from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary Appendix NARRATIVE OF EVENTS, 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1917., included in the November entries: *...the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Rifles), took over the front line trenches from the 13<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion. ...During the night of the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> and the day of the 9<sup>th</sup>, the Battalion was heavily shelled...therefore the Battalion had suffered casualties...of One company Commander four other officers and sixty other ranks; and 25% of all ranks had been buried by shell fire at one time or another during the 24 hours.*

November 9 had been spent in moving the troops into the assembly and jumping-off points, a task accomplished by half-past ten that evening, and also in laying directional tapes to guide the attackers towards their objectives. *...As...every Officer and N.C.O. had, during the 9<sup>th</sup> looked over the front and selected landmarks for the advance, it was considered that every available precaution had been taken as regards ensuring correct direction on to the objective.*



(Right above: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument pictured below – this ground lies in the direction of Zonnebeke – a kilometre or so away and was some of the ground already contested and won before the attack of November 10 – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge – photograph from 2015 from the same place as the one above, but looking in the opposite direction*)

*Punctually at 6.05 a.m. our rolling barrage opened and from the window of the dugout it was possible (at about 6.30) to watch the advance. At 7.00 a.m. the observer reported that the Battalion was retiring in considerable disorder from the objective, and having ascertained that...large numbers of khaki clad soldiers were returning over the crest...the reserve company was ordered forward...*

Throughout the course of the morning messages were received at Battalion Headquarters that: The neighbouring battalion on the left had lost direction and had pushed the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion off course; for no apparent reason a number of troops of the same neighbouring battalion had retired to their jumping-off positions thus having left exposed the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's left flank; German machine-guns had appeared in places where German machine-guns had not been thought to be; and a further neighbouring battalion had failed to advance at all.



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

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

By this time heavy casualties were also being reported as well as shortages of food and water; certain Companies were beginning to request relief. By five o'clock that evening it was the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion that was requesting it. By then...*As far as the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was concerned, the front line was held by 150 men which was all the available battalion left, and reports were continually arriving that the men in the line were in a very exhausted condition and that most of the Lewis Guns had been knocked out. The former assertion was borne out by three men dying in the Dressing Station of exhaustion and two others on the way were drowned in the RAVENSBECK, not having the strength to cross the little stream\*.*



*\*Apparently the Battle of Passchendaele was the only period of the Great War during which statistics were kept of soldiers drowned. It should also be remembered that the rains were exceptionally heavy that year and that normally innocuous streams were at times to be transformed into deep and dangerous water-courses.*



(Right above: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial (see below). – photograph from 2010*)

In some sources the date of November 10 is cited as the last official day of the *Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele* – July 31 had been the opening day - even though there was still a great deal of fighting to occur, some of it to involve troops of the Canadian Corps.

(continued)

(Right: *In Tyne Cot Cemetery there lie just fewer than twelve-thousand dead of which some seventy-five hundred remain unidentified; on the Tyne Cot Memorial – the panels on the wall – are commemorated a further thirty-five thousand who have no known grave. Among them are to be counted many of those who ‘had the honour’ of attacking Passchendaele Ridge. – photograph from 2010*)



The Battalion retired during that night, at first to Belleview – a temporary location with an English name – then to the camp at Wieltje, before boarding a train on November 12 to return to Brandhoek, whence the Battalion had come to the field of *Passchendaele* a week and a day before.

Although it is almost inevitable that some of those recorded as *missing* were to report to duty during the eighty or so hours after its withdrawal from battle, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion after its initial retirement, on November 11 had numbered only two-hundred thirty-one *all ranks*.

On November 14 the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles*) was to depart from *Passchendaele* and from the *Kingdom of Belgium*, just two days after its retirement from the field. Busses and motor lorries had then carried the battalion personnel southwards into France, at first to Merville, then to Annexin before it had moved from there under its own steam – on foot - via billets in Hersin-Coupigny and Gouy-Servins, to finish at *Souchez Camp* where it had reported on November 22.

The unit had now arrived back much in the area that it had left in mid-October to march towards Belgium and *Passchendaele*.

*Souchez Camp* was now to be home to the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion for a week, a bath having been first on the agenda. Apparently also at first...*Owing to the nature of Country, Coy. Commanders found difficulty in locating Parade grounds* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for November 23, 1917)...undoubtedly much to the chagrin of the Coys. (*Companies*) in question.

The officers, however, had apparently eventually been successful in their quest: there now followed six parades during the following seven days.

Thereafter, duty in the line for the first eight days of December and two days in reserve was followed a further eight, away from *the Front*, in Gouy-Servins and Fosse 10.

During the period of their reliefs to rear areas in early December, - the Canadian Infantry Battalions – in fact all the Canadian Armed Forces in Europe and the United Kingdom - had been afforded the opportunity to cast a vote in the Canadian National Election ongoing at the time. It would appear that the polls were open on various dates from December 4 to 17 – inclusive – and that a high number, greater than ninety per cent, of Canadian military personnel exercised its franchise.

The turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion to vote – and to have yet another bath - came about of December 13. There is no report in the War Diary of the numbers who chose to exercise their right, but there is no reason to suppose it to have been different from other units.

Christmas Day of 1917 was to be spent even further afield from the fighting, at Bruay. No menu appears in the War Diary, but as a sop to the occasion, no parade had been scheduled – although an hour's Physical Training was undertaken in the a.m..

None of the winters of the *Great War* on the *Western Front* was to be the occasion for any major infantry operations by any of the opposing forces; once again it was the artillery which was busier. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been the host to a minor German raid, repulsed, on January 22, and had returned the compliment on February 13 at a price of one *gassed* and one *wounded*.

The daily patterns of existence had also remained the same – to which, of course, given the time of year, was added the problem of keeping warm. Apart from occasional leave granted, the routine of the day – rain, snow, mud, patrols, wiring, shelling, mustard-gas, phosgene-gas, sniping, bombing, carrying-parties, working-parties, inspections, church, sports, concerts, musketry, drills, route-marches, cuts, scrapes, tooth-ache, colds, 'flu and the occasional bath - was to prove much the same during this fourth winter of the Great War as it had been during the previous three.

Then soon, the winter was drawing to a close and it was the first day of spring, March 21.

Perhaps not many people realize how very close the Germans were to come to victory in that March and April of 1918. Having transferred to the west the numerous Divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the war, on the *Western Front* the Germans would launch a massive attack, designated as Operation '*Michael*', on that March 21.



The main blow was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it had fallen for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there, particularly where they were serving adjacent to units of the French Army.

(Right above: *While the Germans were not to attack Lens – one source claims this to be nearby Liévin - in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

The German advance was to continue for some three weeks before having begun to peter out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive would be the result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and a great deal of French co-operation with the British were to be the most significant.

*\*A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', was to fall in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division – and for a while with the 34<sup>th</sup>. It also had been successful for a while, but was struggling by the end of the month.*



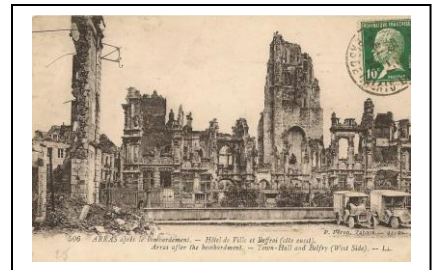
(Preceding page: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)

In the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary, the first mention of the crisis, for such it was to prove on both fronts for the first weeks, was entered on March 23, the day on which the Battalion had received and acted upon orders to move to *Camp Niagara* in the Canadian military complex established by then in close proximity to Chateau de la Haie. The final sentence of the day reads: *The move to NIAGARA CAMP being as a result of the big German offensive along the front from River OISE (to the south) to SCARPE (in the north).*

During the days that were to follow the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion stood to on several occasions, ready to move to any crisis point on short notice. To that end, after four days at *Niagara Camp* it was transported, in succession, to St-Aubin, to Moncieux, to Pas, to Mondicourt, Wanquetin to Berneville and to Dainville – all in the space of seven more days.

(Right below: *The City Hall of Arras and its bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)

The German attack, as has been seen, had been to the south of the Canadian positions, among other objectives the principal one having been to divide the British and French armies one from the other. The majority of the Canadian units – if not all – while having been placed on alert, and some having moved southward in case their services were to become necessary\*, were not to be involved in the fighting. They were to be the recipients of German artillery attention more active than usual but that was all.



*\*Those that were to be moved were transferred to areas towards the south and south-west of Arras to forestall any breakthrough in the direction of the Channel ports. While there was to be an important attack in that area it was repulsed by the British Third Army in its positions to the south, south-east and east of Arras. The Canadians were spared any great infantry activity – but they had been prepared.*

The state of emergency appears to have diminished in its intensity by the first days of the month of April as, by now, working-parties were being provided for tasks other than manning the trenches. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was still to remain at Dainville until the 5<sup>th</sup> when it had been ordered into or into the close vicinity of Arras itself.

It was just prior to this move, reportedly on April 4 - although noted on April 2 in the Battalion War Diary - that Private Steele and his Draft of seventy-two *other ranks* from the Canadian Corps Re-enforcement Camp at Calonne-Ricouart, had reported *to duty* with their new unit.

\* \* \* \* \*

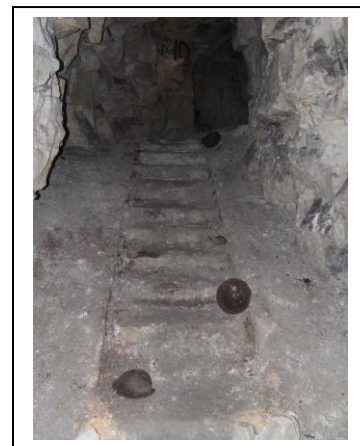
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April 5, only a very short time after their arrival at the front, must surely have been an interesting day not only for Private Steele and the others of his Draft, but even for some of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's veterans who had already seen many things.

Since the construction of Arras centuries before, many of the older houses and commercial building, particularly those of the Grand'Place and Petit Place, had been furnished with cellars. Elsewhere as the city had grown, underground quarries had evolved in two of its districts, St-Sauveur and Ronville. In 1916, their re-discovery and subsequent development by Army tunnelling companies, had resulted in huge underground galleries capable of accommodating – and hiding - some twenty-four thousand men at any one time.

It was into the complex of the *Ronville Caves* that the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion was to descend - if only for two days. It had then been ordered posted to the *Fampoux Sector* to the north-east of the city, apparently passing through the sewers and tunnels of the city in order to expedite its passage.

(Right: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system - hewn in the rock under much of Arras - almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. Linked to the cellars of the city and the St-Sauveur system, the complex was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions. – photograph from 2012*)



From the time of Private Steele's Battalion leaving the relative security of the *Ronville Caves* there was little out of the ordinary entered by the War Diarist into his journal. Even the later German attack – *Georgette* – of April 9 in the north does not appear to have elicited the same response as had *Michael* from the Canadians who were stationed not far distant from the southern flank of that second offensive. There was to be no movement in the direction of that additional danger despite the *Backs to the Wall* communique released at the time by Douglas Haig.

The Battalion now settled into the by-now familiar – except to Private Steele and his comrades-in-arms from the Reinforcement Camp – way of life, and death, the lot of the soldier of the *Great War*. It was to last until the end of July.

Meanwhile, in the greater scheme of things, after the German offensives of March and April, a relative calm had descended on the front as the German threat had faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there had been nothing of any military significance lost to the Allies on either of the two fronts. Nor was the calm to be particularly surprising: both sides, having been exhausted, were to now need time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

The Allies from this point of view were to be a lot better off than their German adversaries: each had an empire to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene.

(continued)

An overall Commander-in-Chief had by now been appointed, on March 26, in response to the German offensive of 1918 at *the Somme*, Ferdinand Foch, and since that operation's ultimate failure, he had been setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.



(Right: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch*, this photograph from 1921, became *Generalissimo of the Allied Armies* on March 26, 1918. – photograph from the *Wikipedia* web-site)

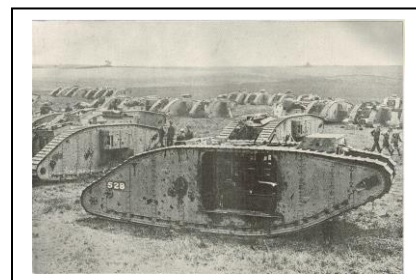
On July 29 the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had retired from its support positions into and though Arras, having then boarded a light railway for the eighteen-or-so kilometre journey to the west and to the vicinity of Hauteville. On August 1, now on foot, the unit continued on to Manin, five more kilometres distant.

Manin was only a collecting point where the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion trained before being on its way once more. At mid-night on August 3 Private Steele and his unit began a four-hour march to Ligny le Feuchy where a train was boarded. Apparently, according to the War Diarist, the destination at the time was as yet unknown, and sealed orders were only to be opened once the Battalion was en route. All that was known even then – or more likely guessed – by most, was that upon arrival at the coastal town of Étaples the train turned to the left – therefore southward.

Several more hours were now to pass on board before the unit detrained at an obscure locale identified as Seron Pont at three o'clock in the afternoon from there to march to Méricourt – likely Méricourt l'Abbé. There the personnel of the Battalion rested until the evening of August 6.

Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles) War Diary for August 6, 1918: *In accordance with Operational Order No. 163 the Battalion moved out of MERICOURT to the embussing point at 6.20 p.m. It had been a busy day up to this time. The C.O. addressed the Officers and N.C.Os telling them of the new front line into which the Battalion was going, what they might expect and what was to be expected of them. The whole of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade embussed, which was accomplished by 9.00 p.m. and the long line moved off.*

*At midnight the city of AMIENS was reached and the Battalion de-bussed, formed up and marched out of the silent city. The streets were very much congested with tanks, artillery, ammunition columns, motor lorries and troops. So dense was the traffic at some points that the men had to pick their way in single file. The whole mass of fighting material was moving south-eastwards.*



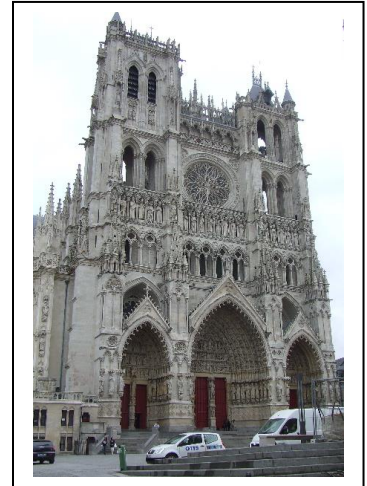
(Right above: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'. Many of the troops to be involved in the fighting from this time onwards underwent training in the company of tanks. – from Illustration*)



(Right: *The gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – photograph from 2007(?)*)

Private Steele's 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had not been the only Canadian unit on the move at this time. Within a matter of days, at the end of July and beginning of August of 1918, it had been almost the entire Canadian Corps which had been transferred from the sectors north of and around Arras to face the Germans on the front established at the time of their offensive four months earlier\*.

*\*Two(?) units had gone in the opposite direction, towards Belgium, in order to make it as obvious as possible that the Canadian Corps was making its way northwards for a future offensive based on the Ypres Sectors.*



The majority of the Canadian forces had passed to the west, behind the city of Amiens before turning eastward, marching during the hours of darkness, to ensure surprise. This it had succeeded in doing, as the events of the few following days were to prove. Once having arrived in Amiens, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was now to do likewise on that night of August 6-7, marching the eight to ten kilometres south-east to the vicinity of Blangy.

**OPERATIONAL ORDER NO.164. In the Field 7.2 (sic). 18. (Excerpt)**

***OUTLINE - The Canadian Corps will carry out an attack with the French on the Right and the Australians on the Left.***

***The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division will attack with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division on its Right and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division on its Left.***

***Tanks will co-operate.***

***Cavalry will be ready to assist.***

***The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division will be ready to exploit success...***

Excerpts in italics from the Narrative of Events No. 1 in the War Diary Appendices for the month of August, 1918: There at Blangy the unit was now to spend the daylight hours, after which...*between 9.30 p.m. and 10.00 p.m. that evening the battalion moved forward to their assembly positions in GENTEELES (in fact Gentelles Wood) and trenches just east of GENTEELES (Gentelles), and by midnight they were all ready to proceed with the operation – thus as ZERO hour was set for 4.20 a.m., and our Brigade was not to move forward until two hours after ZERO, all ranks had the opportunity to rest for about 6 hours.*

*...and so at 6.20 a.m. the Battalion commenced to advance...closely following the 10<sup>th</sup> Cdn. Battalion which...however, took a course considerably to the south of the line of their advance, presumably on account of better roads for their limbers. ...our Battalion...carrying their supplies by means of pack mules...were able to make a straight advance forward...*

***(Right: Canadian soldiers consolidate newly-won positions while others cross a river – the Somme? - on an improvised bridge. – from Le Miroir)***



***As soon as it found out that the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion held the AMIENS LINE OF DEFENCE, then “C” Coy...established two strong points there south of the main road through CAIX. “B” Coy. established two strong points...on the easterly edge of CAIX. Both...organized immediately for counter-attack...***

***“A” Coy. established strong points... “D” Coy. established strong points...***

***The Battalion had reached its objective...with only three casualties... A threatened German counter-attack came to nothing. Ammunition was beginning to run short, thus...In the evening, 66,000 rounds of S.A.A. (small-arms ammunition) were brought up by our Transport.***



***(Right above: A group of German prisoners, some seen serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background – from Le Miroir)***

***On the night of the 8/9<sup>th</sup> the C.O. attended a Conference at Brigade and learned that a further advance would be made by our Brigade and that the time of advance was questionable, but that it would probably be about 30 hours later, but it might possibly be the following afternoon.***

**Thus was to end for the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion and for Private Steele, the attack of August 8, 1918, a day on which the Canadians had in places advanced some eleven kilometres, a happening almost unheard of in the four previous years of the Great War\*. This, however had not been the case all along the front and in places the British, the Australians and the French – the French not using tanks - were to face a more determined German resistance which was soon to considerably affect the pace of the offensive – and at times halt it.**

***\*After the opening months of the War, most advances were to be measured in metres rather than kilometres, the major exceptions having been November 20, 1917, the first day of the ‘First Battle of Cambrai’ and the initial weeks of ‘Operation Michael’, the German attack of that spring of 1918.***

**The second day of the advance still saw a number of gains made but the enemy was by then beginning to organize a more robust defence. The attacks of the day, complicated by a number of factors, still reached their objectives, but the price paid for success had become a great deal higher.**



**(continued)**

(Preceding page: *French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix, just to the west of Rosières. Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground. – photograph from 2017*)

At the outset, due to the non-arrival on the flanks of the supporting units, the advance had to be postponed for some three hours. In places the Germans had succeeded in infiltrating the advanced Canadian positions and had sited machine-guns at strategic points, points which were in turn themselves covered by further machine-guns. Many of the tanks which had supported the troops on the day before were by now inoperable – and the Germans were also learning how to deal with them – thus there was much less support from that quarter for the infantry. And as of that second day, the German artillery was being to re-act with its familiar efficiency and ferocity and the almost absent counter-attacks of August 8 were less absent on August 9.

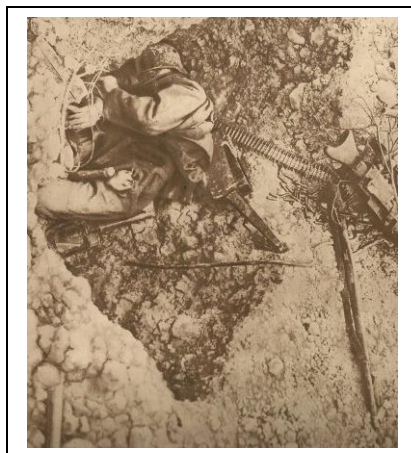
Whereas on August 8 the Battalion's objectives had been attained and held at little cost, on the 9<sup>th</sup>...*the Brigadier 'phoned that he wished the Battalion to hold the actual Final Objective, and three Posts were accordingly shoved out beyond the Road.*

Any doubt as to the resolution of the German defence of August 9 in the face of the attacks by the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion and by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade in particular – and in turn, of the Canadians in taking their objective – may be dispelled by the casualty figures: three in total on August 8; sixty-seven *killed in action*, three-hundred sixteen *wounded*, forty-five *wounded and missing*; and seven *missing in action* on August 9.

On the morning of August 10, other units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division passed through those *in situ* as of the evening prior; a German plane was shot down by a Battalion Lewis gunner; and at two-thirty in the afternoon word was received that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be withdrawn to the area of Warvillers one half-hour later.

The last word of that day goes to the Battalion War Diarist: *A meeting of Battalion Officers was called in the evening, and before the Officers retired to rest the Battalion was once more re-organized and ready for action...400 strong.*

(Right: *A German machine-gunner who also gave his all – from Illustration*)



The following six days were to be spent by the Battalion at Warvillers. The general offensive was to now to come to a halt due, if not to set-backs, to disappointing progress on both flanks as mentioned in a prior paragraph.

In his entry of August 12 in his journal the War Diarist has written: *Captain J. Whillans, acting as Burial Officer for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, began to organize the burial of the dead, which lay on the battle-field between CAIX and WARVILLERS. "MANITOBA MILITARY CEMETERY" was formed where our gallant dead were laid side by side to sleep their last long sleep in the VALLEY OF THE SOMME.*

(Right below: *Within the bounds of Manitoba Cemetery (the 'Military' of the above entry has since been deleted) lie or are commemorated one-hundred twenty dead of the Great War, a great number of whom were soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion (90<sup>th</sup> Winnipeg Rifles). – photograph from 2016)*

August 16 had at one point been planned as the date for the temporarily stalled offensive to resume, but that too had been negated although on August 17 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade was moved forward into Brigade Reserve. The following three days were to be spent by Private Steele's unit in providing working-parties, salvage-parties and burial-parties while at the same time sheltering from the attention of the German guns.



Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for August 20, 1918: *Word was received from Brigade that the 173<sup>rd</sup> French Regiment would take over the Area during the night. Only the Front Line Battalions, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, however, had to wait until night for the relief. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, being back in Reserve were enabled to move out in the afternoon, arriving in WARVILLERS about 3 p.m. where packs which had been stored were collected by the men. The Battalion proceeded to LES (in fact Le) QUESNEL where baths had been arranged after which hot tea was served. After dark the march was continued to WIENCOURT where the Battalion occupied bivvies in the Open Field behind the shell-wrecked village...*

(Right: *Hillside Cemetery, Le Quesnel, within the bounds of which lie at least two Newfoundlanders who were wearing a Canadian uniform – photograph from 2015)*

It was not to be until the evening of August 25 that Private Steele and the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion boarded a train and left the theatre of the *Third Battle of Amiens* from the village of Saleux where the War Diarist made note of the friendly reception the troops had enjoyed from the local population.



The train halted on a number of occasions, on at least two occasions orders were issued before being countermanded, and a journey by bus to Arras was diverted to nearby St-Aubin: thus it was to be some twenty-two hours before the Battalion was settled into its next billets. But, of course, by that time the Battalion was back in the area of Arras from which it had marched twenty-four days before.



(Right above: *A further photograph of a what was to remain of Arras, this one of the first buildings to be destroyed in the four-year bombardment, on October 6, 1914. – from a vintage post-card)*

Private Steele's Battalion had not arrived in the area alone, nor had it been the only Canadian unit to leave the Amiens Front: as early as the third week of August, elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisions had been withdrawing from the recent battle-field and were on their way back whence they had come only three weeks previously.

By August 27 the *final* units of the Canadian Corps were moving back to the area to the east of Arras, their places in front of Amiens having been progressively taken over by elements of the French Army.

The Canadians were to depart from the area of Amiens in much the same manner as in which had arrived: at first on foot, then by motorized transport and by rail; they also moved rapidly and discreetly for the same reason as before - secrecy. The Corps, in tandem with British units, was now to attack the Germans on another old battle-field, that of the *First Battle of Arras* fought in the spring of 1917.

In fact, by the time that the last Canadian troops arrived back in the vicinity of Arras, the first had already gone to the offensive – an operation to become known to history as the *Battle of the Scarpe* - on a new front. As early as the evening of August 25... *a very wet and dirty night...*the first attacking battalions had moved forward into their assembly areas... *trenches 1500 yards EAST of ARRAS.*



(Right above: *Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon. – photograph from 2015*)

*\*Of interest to Newfoundland readers may be that on August 26 Monchy-le Preux was captured by troops of the 3<sup>d</sup> Canadian Division. More than sixteen months earlier, on April 14 of 1917, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had been ordered forward into a battle that should never have been. While a desperate defence later in the day had earned ten men – nine from the Regiment – a medal each, the unit had suffered some four-hundred eighty killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner.*



*After Beaumont-Hamel, April 14, 1917, was to be the costliest day of the (Royal) Newfoundland Regiment's war.*

At St-Aubin training was carried out on August 27 until the evening of the day when the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved up for the night to billets in Arras itself. On the morrow, August 28, after instructions and counter-instructions once again, the unit began to move up to the front lines. However, not only were the roads congested but German resistance had slowed the attack by the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade already underway; thus it was decided that the Battalion wait for the way ahead to be cleared.

Further crowding of the roads and a dark night made this task all the more difficult, exacerbated as well by a lack of guides but, by daylight on the 29<sup>th</sup>, the Battalion had relieved the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade troops and had established positions, with posts on both flanks, from which operations might be commenced.

(continued)

However, the morning light showed that some of the trenches taken over by the Battalion that night were quite exposed and devoid of cover; the personnel therein were to be obliged to keep still and to remain under cover. Gas and high-explosive shelling by the enemy also ensured that this was to be the case as was the frequent appearance of enemy aircraft which strafed the occupied trenches.

In the afternoon the 8<sup>th</sup> co-operated with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion which had been scheduled to make an attack on the following day. It had thus moved up to its assembly points having in fact been provided with ammunition and other supplies of which it was in need, by their comrades-in-arms of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion itself remained where it was for that night of August 29-30, making some adjustments to its line and establishing further outposts.

On the morrow despite all its efforts – and all the supplies furnished to it by the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion - the attack by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was not to be a success. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion thus found itself – instead of an expected relief, now postponed for twenty-four hours – ordered to in its turn attack and to capture three German positions, an assault that the artillery would not be able to support until two o'clock the following morning, August 31 – a time later amended to five o'clock, three hours later.

The opening barrage was delivered as planned on that morning. As had become normal by this stage of the *Great War*, it was the German machine-gunners who made things most difficult for the advancing infantry, particularly from the left flank, and the objectives, even though captured, were not to be consolidated until mid-morning due to the continued enfilading fire – even then plans for a further push through No-Man's-Land were cancelled for that same reason. Nor was the overdue relief forthcoming until after midnight as, even as late as that, those machine-gunners were covering the entire area in which was sheltering both the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion and the relieving unit.

Total casualties incurred by Private Steele's Battalion, according to the Battalion War Diarist, for this four-day period had amounted to ninety-eight.

(Right: *Canadian troops reportedly sharing their rations with prisoners recently taken in the fighting at the Scarpe or at the Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir*)



The next two days were to see further attacks by units of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions on the so-called *Drocourt-Quéant Line*, itself a part of the immense German defensive system known to English-speaking troops as the *Hindenburg Line*, to the Germans as the *Siegfriedstellung*. This defensive complex had been built during the winter of 1916-1917 by some five-hundred thousand labourers and, approximately one-hundred sixty kilometres in length, had been held in high regard by those whose duty it would be to break through.

It was to prove to be surprisingly fragile: to be broken on two fronts within the space of two days.

(continued)

On September 1, uncaptured objectives of August 31 and then further defensive sites in areas in front of the *Drocourt-Quéant Line* were taken by units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, primarily the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion who had replaced the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion for these operations at the last moment. It thus transpired that Private Steele and his colleagues of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, after its relief on the night of August 31-September 1, were to spend that day in reserve in a forward rest area, their services not called upon.

Also on this September 1, plans were being finalized for the attack of the next day on the *Drocourt-Quéant Line* itself, an operation for which the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to serve – apparently unexpectedly - in a support role for the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion.

During the early morning of September 2, Private Steele and his unit, the personnel carrying all necessary equipment as the Battalion Transport was unable to manoeuvre through the once-again congested roads, followed in the steps of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion through the broken defences of the Drocourt-Quéant Line and to the vicinity of the community of Villers-les Cagnicourt. It was there that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion had its first confrontation of the day with the enemy, incurring a number of casualties due, as ever, to his machine-guns.

(Right: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth Forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of August-September against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir*)



The Battalion eventually won its way through, taking a number of prisoners as it did, some of them apparently happy enough to be taken, as documented here in the War Diary Appendix Number 1 for the month of September, 1918: *The German Officer...did not want to surrender, but his men thinking otherwise, killed their Officer and threw up their hands.*

Villers-les-Cagnicourt thus fell into Canadian hands as did the following objective, the area known as the *Buissy Switch*. As the day ended the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered to establish defensive positions to the north and north-east of Villers-les-Cagnicourt in anticipation of German counter-attacks.



(Right: *Captured German ordnance and munitions taken during the Canadian advance of 1918 towards the Canal du Nord – from Le Miroir*)

On the following day, having passed an unexpectedly peaceful night, the Battalion had soon been ordered to push patrols along the main road in the direction of Cambrai and also to do likewise to the south of the road, covering the high ground before it fell away towards the Canal du Nord.



(continued)

**(Preceding page: Some of the many prisoners taken during the fighting on the Drocourt-Quéant Line, some carrying wounded comrades, on their way to the Canadian rear area – from *Le Miroir*)**

**(Right: *Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery: The cemetery contains 2,369 soldiers from this period of the Great War – originally mostly from 1918 - of whom only 885 have been identified. – photograph from 2010)***



**Canals were – and still are - an important feature of the continental transportation system, and in peace-time ensured – and still ensure - the transportation of goods throughout north-eastern France, south-western Germany, and through Belgium into Holland. At the time, the Canal du Nord was still a work in progress but, although unfinished and dry in places, it was a formidable barrier to any army seeking to force a crossing. It flows north-south and thus was to cut directly across the line of advance of the Canadian and British forces converging on Cambrai.**



**(Right above: *Wide enough to be an imposing obstacle to troops attempting to cross it under fire, this is the Canal du Nord in the area of Marquion where it intersects the Arras to Cambrai road – photograph from 2015)***

**It was here, on the eastern bank of the Canal du Nord, that it was expected that the Germans would make a serious stand. And it was from the eastern bank of the Canal that the German artillery began to inflict heavy casualties as the soldiers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion surmounted the high ground and descended the open and exposed slope towards the waterway.**

**Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary for September, 1918, Appendix Number 1: *As our first troops crossed the high ground west of the Canal du Nord the enemy directed fire over open sights with his artillery from the far side of the Canal. This caused...many casualties. The guns were difficult to definitely locate and were for the most part out of range of our Lewis guns...***



**(Right above: *A Canadian officer inspects a German artillery piece captured in the advance to the Canal du Nord, but likely not before it had inflicted damage upon the oncoming Canadian and British forces. – from *Le Miroir**)**

**Nevertheless, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued to close up to the west bank of the Canal, having reached it in some places, and to establish outposts in the area and along the Arras-Cambrai road. While some German forces had already retreated to the far side – the eastern – of the waterway, there remained considerable numbers, still resilient, on the western side – thus the outposts.**



However, any further advance was now to be undertaken by other battalions and the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Battalions were to retire to bivouacs in the rear area that same evening, relieved by troops of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, from there to be taken by bus on the following day, September 4, to Wanquetin to the west of Arras.

The following day, September 5, appears to have been a most enjoyable one: It began with a bath and a change of clothing, that to be followed by a pay parade and the news that there was a Battalion Canteen open with a large stock – although whether it – the Canteen - was *wet* or *dry* is not specified. The quasi-festive mood was then crowned by the appearance of the Battalion Band which commenced on that day what was to be a series of concerts. What was more was that the huts were large and comfortable and that both the quality and quantity of the field kitchens were more than adequate.

On the next day, however, Battalion personnel were brought back to reality as training began in earnest for an operation than most were aware was looming on the horizon – the crossing of the Canal du Nord. To this end the unit also received a number of reinforcement drafts to take the place of those who had fallen and thus the Battalion, upon its subsequent departure from Wanquetin, was to number twenty-five officers and nine-hundred eighteen other ranks.

On September 18...*A Brigade warning order was received in the evening that the Battalion would move Sept. 20<sup>th</sup> by rail to the Mercatel-Henin area...*(Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 18, 1918)

And so it was to prove - on this occasion there had been no counter-instructions to contradict the order. On that September 20 a march to Wanquetin Station was followed by a train journey – accompanied by the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion – to the prescribed billeting area. The unit arrived there at three o'clock in the afternoon to find that those afore-mentioned field kitchens had preceded it; thus all was well and...*Despite the lack of sufficient shelters, which had been ordered but had not arrived, the men soon threw up bivvies from material found about the place to protect themselves from the very wet weather...*(Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 20, 1918)

Private Steele's Battalion were to remain in their allotted area until September 25 when the unit marched to nearby Hendicourt, played there for part of the way by the pipes and drums of the 25 Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*). The five days preceding had been taken up by training although there was to be one special occasion as recounted below by the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist:

*At 7 P.M. a message reached Battalion Headquarters that His Majesty, the King, has awarded the VICTORIA CROSS to No. 1987, Corporal FREDERICK GEORGE COPPINS, No. 630651 L/Sgt. ALEXANDER BRERETON of this Battalion for brave deeds done in the Amiens 'Show'...the good news quickly communicated to all the men. ...Messages of congratulation were despatched at once to Cpl. Coppins, V.C., in hospital in England recovering from wounds, and to L/Sgt. Brereton sick at the Base hospital...*(Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 22, 1918)



(Preceding page: The Victoria Cross – FOR VALOUR)

September 27 was the day on which the four Canadian Divisions stormed the Canal du Nord in different areas – in both the dry, unfinished sectors but also where there was already water. As had been the case at the breaching of the *Drocourt-Quéant Line* at the beginning of that month of September, the breakthrough was perhaps surprisingly easy as the German defences do not appear to have held in very many places, and it was again to be some hours before the enemy began to react in any forceful and co-ordinated manner\*.

*\*By now the Germans were facing offensives on three fronts, and within two days a fourth, in Belgium, was to be opened; they were stretched, logistical failure was becoming a problem as was the increasing reluctance of some German units to fight what was becoming, evident to most, a losing battle.*

Private Steele's 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not one of those which forced the crossing of the Canal du Nord, its role on this occasion being to support the attack of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the area south of Marquion yet north and east of *Bourlon Wood*. Neither was the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion involved in the initial fight for the Canal, thus there was to be nothing to impede the crossing of the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion when it eventually did so at a quarter past nine that morning, some four hours after the first attack at Zero Hour, five-twenty.



(Right above: *German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai – from Le Miroir*)

The Battalion was shelled and gassed on its way forward but apparently faced little in the way of infantry opposition. It was to continue to follow in the foot-steps of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion for the remainder of the morning, that unit eliminating the sparse resistance on the way, until the objective designated as the *Blue Line* was reached at just after three-o'clock in the afternoon.



(Right above: *Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bourlon Wood – photograph from 2016*)



(Right above: *Bourlon Wood Cemetery is the last resting-place of two-hundred thirty-five soldiers of the Great War of whom two-hundred twenty-one wore a Canadian uniform. – Photograph from 2017*)

(continued)

(Right: *Looking westward from the heights in the area of Bourlon Wood, a German's-eye view of the ground over which the Canadians were to cross after having traversed the Canal du Nord – photograph from 2015*)



Conforming to its orders, it was now the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion which took the lead on its front, passing through the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion and pushing towards the capture of the village of Haynecourt.

The instructions had also been to push on afterwards to the high ground and to the further community of Abancourt, but it was at Haynecourt that the advance now stalled. Not only did the Germans here mount a counter-attack but it was also here that the Battalion realized that the unit intended to advance on its right-hand side had in fact not done so, that the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion's entire right flank was exposed and vulnerable to further incursions from the enemy.

Thus the remainder of September 27 was spent in pushing outposts and patrols out to the right and taking responsibility for that right flank as far as the easterly – thus furthest – outskirts of Haynecourt. It was therefore in these amended positions that Private Steele and his unit spent that night.

(Right below: *At this stage of the Great War the Canadians were now to fight in territory inter-laced by a network of canals. This, of course, caused great difficulties at time for those responsible for supplying the troops. – from Le Miroir*)

On the morrow, September 28, the advance was ordered to continue, on this day with the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion assaulting with Private Steele's 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion serving as reserve. The attack was not a success: the wire was heavy and had not been cut; the artillery had not had sufficient time to prepare an adequate barrage; and once again, enemy machine-guns were firing from flanking positions when other Canadian units alongside had been unable to keep pace.



The advance came to a halt in order for a better-prepared operation to take place on the following day again. And for this next occasion the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to relieve the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion as the spear-head of the attack; it thus moved forward into position on that evening of September 28. The Battalion was soon ready, but not so the planners: ominously, there had been much disagreement about how to proceed with the upcoming action.

Much of the success of the fighting on September 29 would depend upon what was to happen on the flanks of the attack, particularly...*upon the advance of flanking units. We were already in advance of flanking units, on the lip of a saucer. If flanking units did not advance on either side...then whatever unit assaulted...would be exposed to enfilade fire from machine guns against which they would be powerless and which must indubitably cause heavy casualties. However, the matter was not in the hands of our Brigade to decide...*(Excerpt from the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 29, 1918)

Apparently, when the attack went in at six o'clock the next morning, the British unit to the left made forward progress. This seems to have been one of the few pieces of good news for the day. The War Diarist takes up the narrative...*The initial barrage line laid down by the Brigade was the road paralleling the CAMBRAI Road, and east of it. (This without consulting the Battalion at all). Our companies had to withdraw from their most forward positions to assemble in a safe area. This operation having necessarily to be done in daylight, was very difficult particularly on the left flank... At 08.00 o'clock the barrage commenced and the 4<sup>th</sup> Division were seen to be moving up our right. On our Left the Barrage was short and "B" Company suffered considerable casualties from our own shelling.*

*After quite a strenuous two days...Even the distressing casualties on our Left, which might have been avoided if more control had been allowed the battalion Commander, did not dampen the ardour of the men...*

*...Everything seemed to be going nicely; observers reported seeing a company advancing on our right, well on towards the objective. We knew we were getting casualties...machine gun fire from the Left warned us that the British had not been successful, but if troops on our right advanced, then the Left flank would be conformed to and dealt with in a sensible manner. ...but it soon became apparent that further advance could not be made as from every flank...(we)...were being enfiladed by machine gun fire.*

*The 4<sup>th</sup> Division got well on to SANCOURT in the early stages but withdrew to the sunken road west of SANCOURT\*. The left flank was absolutely exposed and the whereabouts of the British unknown. At about 10 A.M. word came that all the Officers in "A" and "C" Companies were casualties... "B" Company...were held up by wire, which, though they overcame regardless of losses, put them no further ahead, as the high ground on the Left was held by the Bosch, and from it he was directing machine gun fire and artillery fire over open sights... The companies...disposed themselves to hold the ground gained.*

*\*The attack was made more or less from west to east, thus withdrawing to the west implies that the 4<sup>th</sup> Division units had retreated.*

*Three times the Germans counter-attacked... As the afternoon wore on and it became apparent that the troops on our flank were not catching up, an S.O.S. line was arranged with the artillery and steps taken to collect the forces available into a striking force for whatever might happen.*

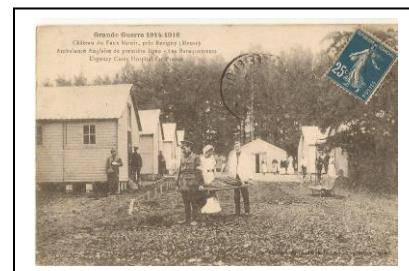


*(Right above: Sancourt British Cemetery, wherein lie two-hundred thirty-seven dead of the Great War, of which twenty remain unidentified – photograph from 2017)*

Relief came about after dark at eight o'clock in the evening and it was time to count the cost of what had been a very trying day: *Killed in action or Died of wounds – sixty four; wounded – two-hundred eighty-two; missing in action – thirty-two; gassed – three.*

(continued)

Private Steele had been one of those later reported as *wounded*. Evacuated from the field to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance – likely an Advanced Dressing Station – he was there treated for...*SW* (shrapnel wound) *Abdomen Penetrating*.



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

The son of Angus Steele, boot- and shoe-maker at the Newfoundland Boot and Shoe Factory, and of Margaret (known as *Maggie*) Steele (née *Travers*, deceased January 12, 1918)\*, the family variously of St. John’s, Newfoundland, the American state of Massachusetts, and the Canadian province of Nova Scotia (see above), he was also brother to thirteen siblings: Anastasia-Maud, Ronald-Daniel, Harry-John, Mary-Florence (known as *Lilian*), Aliceson (sic), Alexander, an un-named infant girl, Marguerite (known as *Marjorie*), Angus-Joseph (known as *Gus*), Henrietta Genevieve (known as *Jenny*)\*, and to Charles James (known as *Charlie*).

*\*To whom on April 3, 1917, he had willed his all.*

*\*\*To whom on May 1, 1918, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay.*

(Right: *The photograph of Trooper Henry Joseph (Harry) Steele - donated by Steve Watson as is some of the family information – is from the ‘Find a Grave’ website.*)



Private Steele was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance as having *died of wounds* on September 29, 1918.

Henry Joseph (*Harry*) Steele had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years and three months: date of birth at St. John’s, Newfoundland, October 11, 1897, (from attestation papers and family sources).

Private Henry Joseph (*Harry*) 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.

