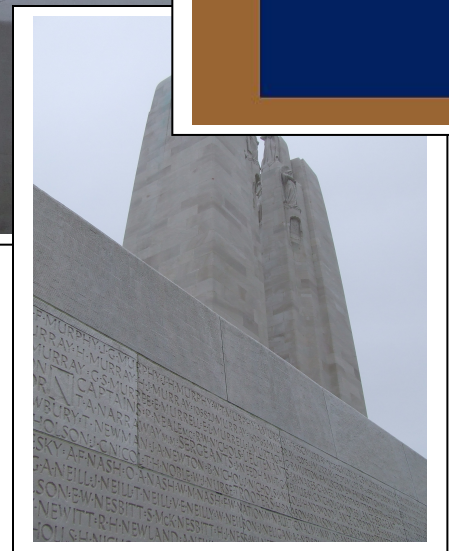
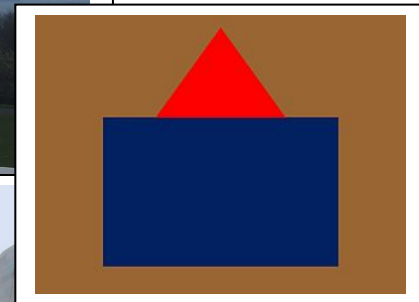




J-T-STEELE



Private John Thomas Steele (Number 877568) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on *Vimy Ridge*.

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

(continued)

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of a *fisherman* then *miner*, John Thomas Steele leaves little if anything behind him *a propos* his early life before his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Cape Breton in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. However, *that* journey appears to have been recorded: the passenger list of November 13, 1912, documents a young Thomas Steele – he also omits the name *John* elsewhere – on board the steamship *Ivermore* during its crossing of the Cabot Strait from Port aux Basques to North Sydney.

By the time a year had passed, John Thomas Steele had found work as a miner in the Cape Breton town of New Waterford. He had also found a wife: on December 10 of 1913 – a year less three days after setting foot in Canada – Thomas Steele took the hand of a Miss Rosa E. Trim in a Methodist ceremony in New Waterford. Just over twelve months later the couple became parents of Frederick, born December 18, 1914. They appear to have had no further children.

His first pay records document March 13 of 1916 as the date on which John Thomas Steele enlisted in New Waterford. On the same day he was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*).

It was then three days afterwards, on March 16 and in the industrial city of Sydney, that he presented himself for medical examination and was found to be *...fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. He thereupon underwent attestation by a Cape Breton justice of the peace.

It was not, however, to be until seven weeks later again, on April 27, that the formalities of those enlistment formalities were to come to a conclusion: on that day the Commanding Officer of the 185th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, declared – on paper – that...*877568 Pte John Thomas Steele...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

By this above date, Private Steele would have already spent the intervening seven weeks undergoing initial training in the town of Broughton*, a community now military camp, only some twenty kilometres to the south of the industrial city of Sydney. He was to remain there for yet a further twenty-six days.

**Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

Private Steele's posting to Broughton was to come to an end in mid-May: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* which was to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at *Camp Aldershot*, Nova Scotia, where the *Brigade* then passed the summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

It was then at seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, that the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of Private Steele's 185th Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* – sister ship of *Britannic*, sunk during the following month, and of the ill-starred *Titanic* - in the harbour at Halifax.



Earlier that same day, the 85th and the 188th Battalions had marched on board, to be followed on the morrow, October 12, by the 219th and the 193rd Battalions.

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

On October 13th - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to file up the gangways before the ship cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. One of the largest liners afloat at the time, for this trans-Atlantic passage *Olympic* was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on October 18, five days later – some sources have October 19 – which may well have been the day on which the troops disembarked. The 185th Canadian Infantry Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the county of Surrey where it was to remain for the following seventeen months.

Those responsible for the organization of the four Nova Scotia battalions into the *Highland Brigade* had envisaged the formation serving as such, as a single entity, in *active service* on the *Western Front*. This, however, was not to come to pass as the casualties of 1916 had left every unit that had fought at *the Somme* in a depleted condition. By December of 1916 the Brigade had been dissembled and much of its personnel sent to France to make good those losses.



The 85th – *not* the 185th - Battalion was to be the exception to the rule as it was sent to France in February of 1917. Serving with the 11th and then the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4th Canadian Division, it was to distinguish itself at first at *Vimy Ridge* and then also during the remainder of the conflict*.

(Right above: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial – an unidentified photograph*)

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to despatch overseas 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 presumptions 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.

Private Steele, however, was to spend but seven weeks less a day in the United Kingdom. On December 5 he was *struck off strength* by the 185th Battalion in England to be *taken on*

strength on the morrow, December 6, in France by the 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) which was already serving on the Continent.

On the night of the 5-6 he had made the crossing of the English Channel; through which ports Private Steele travelled appears not to be recorded among his papers although many troops from *Witley Camp* embarked in Folkestone and landed in Boulogne, some two hours' sailing-time distant. Whichever the case, on December 6 he was reported as present at the large Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, in the area of the French port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

When exactly it was that Private Steele left the Base Depot and reported *to duty* with the 73rd Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) has not been recorded among his papers. However the records of other soldiers who were transferred to the 73rd Battalion from the 185th at the same time, cite the following; it may well be, of course, that he was one of that draft. Then again...

On December 7 a re-enforcement draft was despatched from Le Havre to seek out the parent unit of the 73rd Battalion. Among the draft was a Private Steele, also born in Newfoundland, whose papers document him as having reported *to duty* with the 73rd Battalion on the following day again, December 8. The 73rd Battalion War Diarist has differed, having recorded the occasion as being on December 9, but he goes on to say: *A draft of 150 other ranks received from 185th Highland Battalion from Nova Scotia. Men were all of good physique, intelligent and had a smart appearance...*

At the time the 73rd Battalion was billeted some eight kilometres to the south-west of the larger centre of Béthune, in the community of Ruitz, there to rest, to reorganize and to re-enforce. Only a single week previously it had been... *the last Battalion in the last Brigade of Canadians to leave the SOMME* (Excerpt from the 73rd Battalion War Diary).

* * * * *

The 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4th Canadian Division. The Division had been transferred from England to the Continent in August of 1916, to arrive in the port of Le Havre, and there, like Private Steele, to visit the Base Depot. The 73rd Battalion had spent some forty-eight hours at the Depot before leaving to travel northward on two trains.

Having passed through the larger French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, the unit had de-trained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe. There the 73rd Battalion had found itself in the rear area of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*, and where the by-now veteran 1st Canadian Division was to play a role in the formation of the new-comers.

(Right below: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)*

The 73rd Battalion had subsequently – and briefly – undergone the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches of the *Western Front*. After a final tour in the forward area, it had been relieved on September 23rd and the unit's short experience of the *Ypres Salient* had thus drawn to a close. The Battalion casualties for the month had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – extremely light for *the Salient*.



The troops which had arrived to take the place of Private Steele's Battalion on that final day had been Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the battle-fields of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting, in the first battle to be designated by that name.

After several days of moving and changing billets hither and thither, the 73rd Battalion had then spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations in the cauldron from which its newly-made Irish acquaintances had just retired.

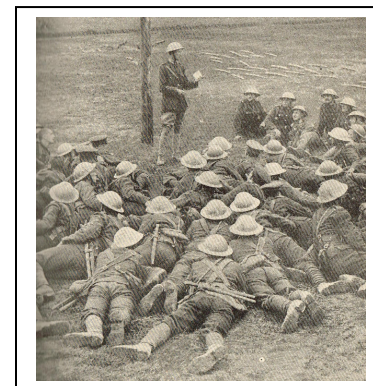
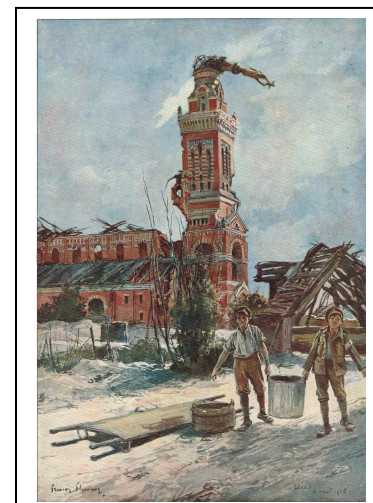
On October 3 the Battalion was to march to nearby Arques where it had entrained. On the following day it had arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from where it was to march once more - in pouring rain - to Beauval where billets had been prepared to receive it. On succeeding days the unit had continued its trek: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it was to undergo a period of training, then on the 13th through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at *Tara Hill* where it had... *Bivouaced* (sic) *in a muddy field (War Diary)*... and provided various working parties for the next dozen or so days.

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

By October of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for some three months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

(Preceding page: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, in September 1916 (see below) – from The War Illustrated)*

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the



Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first the South African Brigade (July 15), then 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.

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



The 73rd Battalion had arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene were being withdrawn, in several cases necessitated by the high incidence of casualties.



On October 26, the 73rd Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now mounds of debris - of Pozières and Contalmaison.

(Right above and right: *The remnants of Pozières just after the conflict, with the Australian Memorial in the gloom* - and also as it is almost a century later – from a vintage post-card and from 2016)

There it had remained in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when the unit had moved forward once more. This was to prove to be a short tour which had terminated on the night of November 2-3; there had been no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery had apparently been active at times.



Casualties for that period had been eight killed, forty-three wounded with twenty-six others having been evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.

(Right: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts* – from *Le Miroir*)

(continued)

During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72nd and 73rd to lead in this attack...*

On the late evening of November 11 the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*



In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, the attack by the Canadians was not to be delivered as planned. Instead, the various units had been ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear which was to be re-enforced by information elicited from German prisoners.

It would appear that neither side had moved, and that the Canadians had thus spent two days preparing for something that was never to come about. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides had influenced the decision not to attack.

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

On the night of November 13-14, the 73rd Battalion had been withdrawn, its place to be thereupon taken in the line by the 47th Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period had been, all told, fourteen *killed in action* and thirty-eight more *wounded*, the greater number due to the German guns.

Two more weeks were to pass before the 73rd Battalion had left behind it the *First Battle of the Somme* and, by that time, had added at least a further sixty to the unit's casualty figures. The withdrawal itself was to be made on foot, it having commenced on November 29 with the unit marching to the west before having turned northwards to pass behind the battered city of Arras.



(Right above: *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*)

The retirement had continued beyond Arras, to Ruitz, which was arrived at on December 5. There the 73rd Battalion was to remain for the next seventeen days, in billets which were reportedly – at least at the outset – *...in poor condition*.



This then, was when and where Private Steele had likely reported *to duty*.

(Right above: *A detachment from a Canadian-Scottish regiment, proceeded by its pipe band, marches toward the front. – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

It was not to be until Christmas Eve that Private Steele would have received his first taste of life in the front-line trenches* – or in the support trenches a few hundred metres to the rear - as it not until that day that the 73rd relieved the 46th Canadian Battalion in the forward area at Souchez.

(Right: *The village of Souchez even before the arrival of the Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)

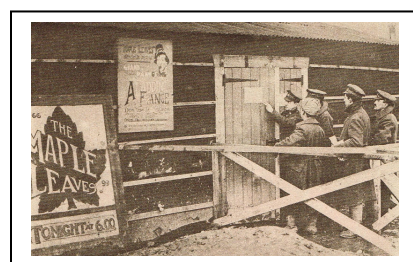


****During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter 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 occasions spent in reserve were opportunities for training, lectures, inspections by the upper echelons – usually the further away from the front, the more important the visitor – route marches, sports, with perhaps the odd concert or other entertainment coming in to support the troops.



(Right: Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir)

In the forward areas life was both hard and monotonous, if also inevitably at times dangerous: there were parties of the construction, wiring and carrying variety. Patrolling and raids on a local scale were often the norm, as were rat-catching and lice hunts. Most casualties were caused by enemy artillery - and occasionally one's own – although snipers were also a constant peril. But it was sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, more particularly, dental problems were to keep the medical services busy during that period.

During that winter of 1917, there was little concerted infantry activity undertaken by either side; nevertheless, in the case of the 73rd Battalion, a major enemy raid was repulsed on January 7th, and the unit was to undertake a costly large-scale operation of its own on March 1.



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

However, the latter incident was to be of little concern to Private Steele as by that time – on February 24-25 of that 1917 – he had been transferred to another Canadian infantry unit: the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*). On the former of the aforementioned dates, February 24, his 73rd Battalion was in the rear area at Villers-au-Bois, training for the attack; on the second, the unit relieved the 78th Canadian Infantry Battalion at the Front.

But where Private Steele was by that time is not clear; there are eight days which appear to be unaccounted for – from February 25 to March 5. All that appears to be recorded among

his personal files is that on that March 5 he reported to *temporary duty* with the 2nd Entrenching Battalion*.

**The War Diary of the 2nd Entrenching Battalion does not record any arrivals on that particular March 5, but it does document a draft of one-hundred fifty-two other ranks reporting from the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, Le Havre, on the day afterwards.*

Whatever were the exact circumstances of his transfer, Private Steele was to spend only two or three days in service with the 2nd Entrenching Battalion which was engaged at the time in carpentry work and street-cleaning in the vicinity of the community of Coupigny. On March 8 he was one of a detachment of one-hundred twenty *other ranks* to be sent to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) which had two days before begun a tour in Brigade Support in the area of Neuville St-Vaast.

Private Steele and his detachment reported to the 25th Battalion later in the day of that March 8.

**These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks. They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However they also came to serve as re-enforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.*



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

* * * * *

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

(continued)

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



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

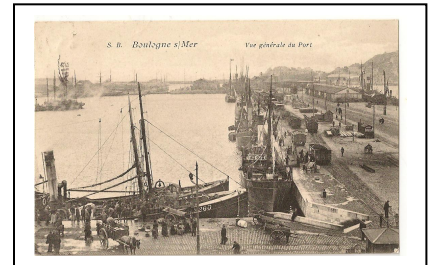


Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25th Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2nd Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. These were in the areas forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel,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

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

The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916.

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



However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, had greeted the newcomers who were to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



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

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

(Right: *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*)



Six weeks later, in early June, the Battalion had then been involved in the fighting in the area of the village of *Hooge*, *Mount Sorrel*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Maple Copse*, in the so-called *Ypres Salient* and just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division was apparently to



play a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.

(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014*)

From the middle of June up until August 20 of 1916, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.



(Right above: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)

Some two weeks after the royal visit, on August 27, the unit had been withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moulle.

The following week at Moulle would be spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle*, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date, as has already been seen had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.

**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 would jam, 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.

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 4 the 25th Battalion was to march to the railway station at Arcques where it had entrained and had travelled overnight, to the south and to Conteville, having arrived there at half-past six on the following morning. From there it had marched to its billets.

During the recent period of training in the vicinity of Moulle, route marches had been a frequent activity. This was to stand the Battalion in good stead, for marching was what it was now to do for five successive days as it covered the ninety or so kilometres on its way towards the sound of the guns and the battlefields of *the Somme*.

On September 10, the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916: *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcellette... the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who had gone over *the top* on the day of the assault, the 25th Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**

**It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*



(Right above: *The village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the 1st Battle of the Somme – photograph from 12017*)

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as KENORA and REGINA... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*

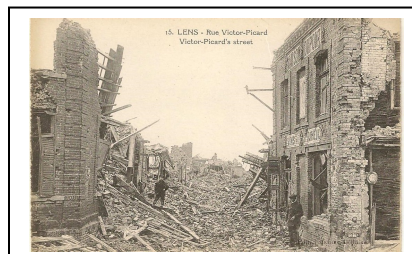


(Right above: *From Courcellette British Cemetery, within its bounds almost two-thousand dead, more than half of them unidentified, may be perceived the nearby Adanac Military Cemetery with its more than three-thousand graves, again half of whose dead remain unknown. – photograph from 1917*)

The attack on *Regina Trench* had failed and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right below: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and had made its way westwards and then northwards. It had subsequently passed to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. There the unit was to remain for the following six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay.

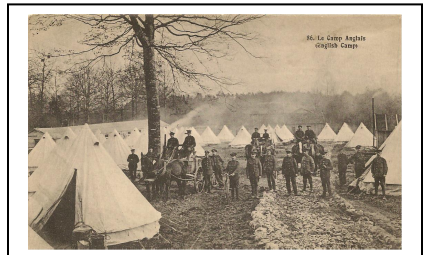


(Right: *This is what was to become of Lens before the Great War ended – from a vintage post-card*)

That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25th Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare*; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a welcome respite.

(Right below: *A British encampment in the field – during the winter months one would surmise – somewhere in France – from a vintage post-card*)

This was, of course, as already noted in a previous paragraph, the time during which Private Steele had been transferred to the 25th Battalion. But even though this had been done on paper of February 24-25, for Private Steele there was to be that one final hurdle to overcome – the 2nd Entrenching Battalion.



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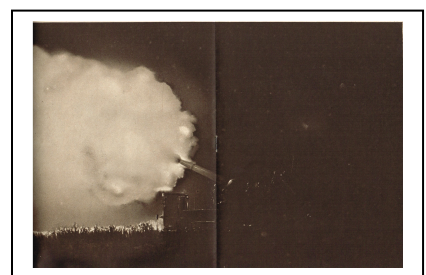
As seen in an earlier paragraph, the 25th Battalion at the time of Private Steele’s arrival had been posted to the area of Neuville St-Vaast, just south of Arras. It was to remain there and then in Divisional Reserve at Bois des Alleux for the next two weeks, from there supplying working-parties for a variety of tasks.

(Right below: *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 to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America – from Le Miroir*)

Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the 25th Battalion had been ordered withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, where it was to undergo intensive training. The exercises had then lasted until, and including, April 7, only two days before that training was to become the real thing. During the final five days, April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked.



As those final days had passed the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier, on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion describing it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn threw retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy.



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

**It must be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*

On April 8... *Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route...* (Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary). Private Steele's unit apparently was not to pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

On April 9, Easter Monday, in that spring of 1917, the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the 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 very few positive episodes having been the assault by the Canadian Corps of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the advance.

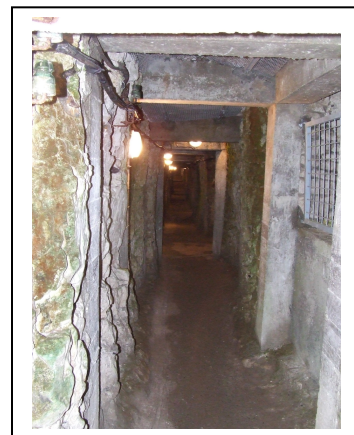


While the British campaign had proved an overall disappointment, that French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

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

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

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

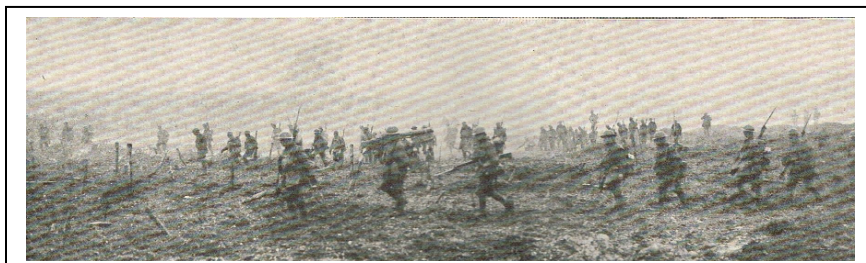


(continued)

The 2nd Canadian Division – with a British brigade under its command - had not been responsible for the taking of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack.

The Battalion's objectives were apparently soon to be captured and much of the remainder of the day had been spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-*



Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration)

(Right below: Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge, anonymous dead lying in the foreground: The fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration)

The Germans, having lost *Vimy Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, had retreated some three kilometres into prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks were also to reclaim ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle in early May.



(Right below: German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration)

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, but highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – however, such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift movement of guns and material.



Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

Inertia, maybe, but that the lines of the opposing sides remained very much *in situ* was not because no-one made an effort to shift them. By April 23, even though Private Steele's unit was behind the lines, its War Diarist reported that it was on that day...*making a dummy Attack on ACHEVILLE.*

(continued)

On April 26 the 25th Battalion moved up once more to the forward area and on the morrow...*in the early morning B Company moved in advance of the line and staked off jumping off trench for coming operations... Usual preparations for the attack were completed... Practice barrage.* (Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for April 27, 1917)

(Excerpts from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for April 28, 1917) *At zero hour 4.25 am, C & D Coys attacked enemy objective. Owing to wire and stiff opposition on part of opposing troops considerable time elapsed before situation could be cleared up and our new front line definitely located. Eventually it was ascertained that both companies were holding their objective, having however suffered fairly heavy casualties.*

Many German dead were found in new positions. D Company were engaged in heavy bayonet fighting with enemy in first stage. As soon as objective was satisfactorily cleared the advance posts were pushed forward and several hundred yards more of enemy ground was secured and our position protected.



...100 O.R. killed and wounded.

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

The son of William Frederick Steele, fisherman, and of Susannah Steele (née *Reynolds*) of Caplin Cove, District of Bay de Verde, Newfoundland – the couple married December 7, 1893 – he was also brother to Chesley-Rexford and to Bertha Priscilla.

As previously recorded in this document, he was also husband to Rosa – he whom in a Will dated August 30, 1916, he had bequeathed his all, and to whom, as of October 1, also of 1916, he had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay – and father to Frederick of New Waterford, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

Private John Thomas Steele was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 28, 1917, his remains never to be found.

John Thomas Steele had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-one years and six months: date of birth in Lower Caplin Cove, Newfoundland, September 21, 1894 (from attestation papers); original papers cite September 27, 1894, at Northern Bay.

Private John Thomas 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 23, 2023.