



Private Cyril Stevens (Number 877600) of the 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery, Haucourt: Grave reference I.E.4., his name the second one engraved on the stone.

(Right: The image of the 85th Battalion emblem, worn as a head-dress cap badge, is from the Wikipedia web-site)

(continued)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of a *fisherman* then *clerk*, Cyril Stevens to have left little if anything behind him *a propos* his early life in the District of Port de Grave before his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Cape Breton in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. That journey may have been the one recorded of the crossing by the steamship *Bruce* on October 5, 1912, of the Cabot Strait from Port aux Basques to North Sydney – the passenger list records a twenty-year old Cyril Stevens on his way, likely to find work, in the above-mentioned mining community of North Sydney.

If this was so, then by the time that three years and six months had then elapsed, Cyril Stevens had found work as a clerk in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney for, whatever had been his history up until that point, it was in the spring of 1916, at Sydney, that he enlisted.

His first pay records document March 14 of 1916 as the date on which Private Cyril Stevens enlisted and underwent a medical examination, a procedure which found him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. He thereupon underwent attestation by a Cape Breton Justice of the Peace on the same day.

The military force by which he was now *taken on strength* was to be the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*), one of the new Canadian Infantry units which, since the *Declaration of War* in August of 1914, were being authorized and organized across the country for *overseas service*.

It was not, however, to be until seven weeks later again, on April 26, 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...*877600, Pte. Cyril Stevens...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 Stevens would have already spent that intervening period 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 Steven'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*.

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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 Stevens' 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 would eventually be 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.*

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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 was to be soon after his arrival at *Witley Camp*, the date October 26, that Private Stevens received promotion to the rank of lance-corporal. However, almost exactly four months later, on February 25, 1917, the reason undisclosed among his files but by his own request, he reverted to *the ranks*.

Just over six weeks later again, on April 10, he was ordered to the not-distant British Army complex of *Camp Aldershot* in order to undergo a machine-gun course and, during this period, to be once more appointed to the rank of lance-corporal. Yet again, little more than a month following, he requested demotion to *the ranks*, a request that was acceded to by the Battalion hierarchy on May 18.

Private Stevens was now to remain in the United Kingdom with the 185th Battalion until the very end of February of the year following, 1918, when he was ordered to *active service* on the Continent.

It was to be on March 1 that Private Stevens arrived in France and proceeded to the 4th Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the area of the French coastal town of Étaples. It was apparently a cold, snowy and rainy day on which Private Stevens draft of four-hundred one re-enforcements arrived at the Depot from England and it was also the day on which he was officially *taken on strength* – thus on paper - by his new unit, the Canadian 85th Infantry Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*).

The Base Depot despatched eight-hundred twelve of its temporary personnel to various units two days later, on March 3, Private Stevens among that number. He was to report to *duty* with the 85th Battalion on the morrow, the 85th Battalion War Diarist having recorded in his entry of March 4...98 *O.R. reinforcements from 185th Battalion arrived*.

It was a day on which the 85th Battalion was resting, training and re-enforcing in the area of the northern French community of Raimbert. Private Stevens was now on *active service*.

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The 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*), as has already been seen, had, upon its arrival in the United Kingdom, been stationed at *Witley Camp* – as had Private Steven’s 185th Battalion - as a component of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade*.

More than sixteen weeks had then passed before it was to be taken by train to, and travel through, on February 10, the English-Channel port of Folkestone on the Dover Straits, to there embark onto His Majesty’s Transport *London* for passage to the Continent.



The Battalion had disembarked at noon on that day in the French port of Boulogne, to march to the nearby *St. Martin's Rest Camp*.

By February 14 it had travelled inland to report to Gouy-Servins where it had remained until the second day of March.

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

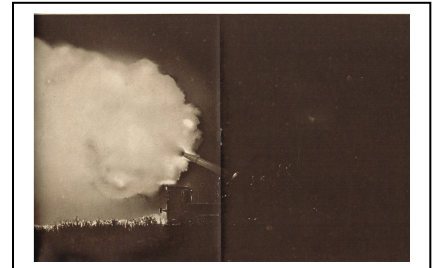
(Right: *An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



A goodly number of sources at this point in the 85th Battalion's history appear to err, often by *omission* it must be said, rather than by *commission* - the author pleads guilty of having originally made the same mistake: While these sources record the Nova Scotia unit as being with the 12th Brigade of the 4th Division, this omits the fact – confirmed by the 11th Brigade War Diary – that it was as an element of this *latter* formation (see immediately below) that the 85th Brigade served until after the action of April 9 at *Vimy Ridge*. The evidence follows:

Excerpt from 11th Brigade... *Operational Order No. 51 issued at 11.15 a.m., 12.IV.17 – On relief the 85th Bn will pass to command of G.O.C. 12th Brigade...*

It appears that the 85th Battalion as an entity was to move forward to the front line for the first time only on April 8. It apparently had been officially originally designated as a *working unit*, to be employed in reserve. Nevertheless, due to its commanding officer's insistence, it had been undergoing exercises for several weeks before training on prepared sites at *Bouvigny Huts...in meticulous fashion...and its officers having being briefed on the upcoming operation.*



(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece spews its flame into the middle of the night during the course of the preparatory bombardment before the First Battle of Arras. – from Illustration*)

The aforementioned insistence by the unit's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Borden, and all those preparations at Bouvigny, were now to stand the 85th Battalion in good stead for what, within weeks, was to follow.

What had followed, of course, was to be the Canadian attack of April 9, 1917, the following day, on *Vimy Ridge*, an operation in which the 85th Battalion was to play a conspicuous role late in the afternoon.

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However, prior to this yet to be undertaken event, the duties and tasks of the 85th Battalion for that day had been ordered as follows: *Construction and filling Dump at Strong Points 5 and 6; Construction of deep dug-out...; Digging C(ommunication) T(rench) from front Assembly Trench...; Party to carry wire and assist Brigade wiring party on construction...; Party to carry forward ammunition for Stokes Guns; Prisoners of War Escort Party; Battle Police...*

On April 9 the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *First 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 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 would prove 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 atop Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

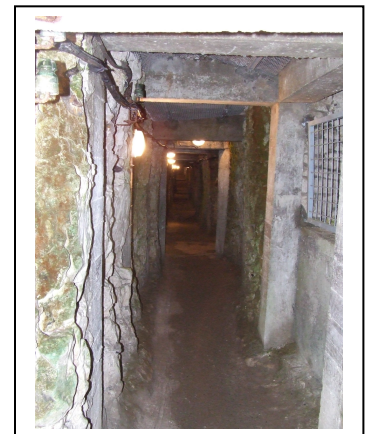
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped – or perhaps encumbered - with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, acting as a single, autonomous entity – there were even British troops operating under Canadian command – had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

In advance of the campaign, several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which were to afford physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack.

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

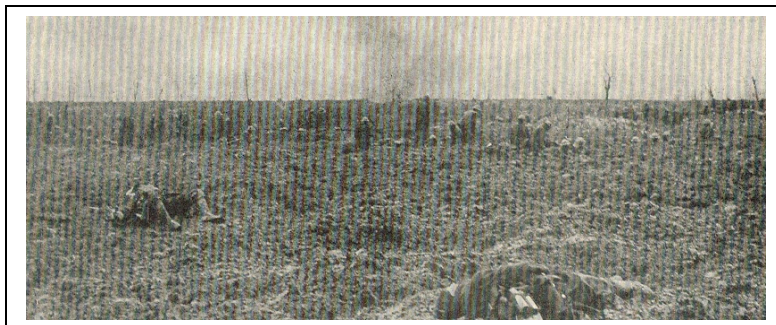


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As already seen, the 85th Battalion had not been assigned a place in the initial assault but had been designated only as a reserve force. However, the caprices of war were about to play a role in the unit's history: At three o'clock on the afternoon of April 9, the C.O. of the 85th battalion had been ordered to despatch two of his four Companies, one to each of the 87th and 102nd Battalions whose assault was being jeopardized by the enemy from positions on top of the crest.

He had also been ordered to be in position with the remainder of his command, at half-past four, in two of those tunnels, there to await further orders.

(Right: *The battle-field of Vimy Ridge on April 10, two unidentified fallen in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)



Those orders were to arrive some thirty minutes earlier than foreseen: *BATTER trench...is strongly held by fresh enemy... Will attack it with 2 companies of 85th...*

4.15 p.m. – G.O.C. (General Officer Commanding) arranges assault on BATTER...by 85th Battalion...

6.30 p.m. – 85th Battalion attacked without a barrage, and reached their objectives without much opposition.

(The above are excerpts from the 85th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)

Apparently the objectives in question were known collectively as *Hill 145* which, once taken, had thereupon been consolidated into a strong-point by the 85th Battalion.

Today the Canadian National Memorial stands atop that same *Hill 145*.



(Right above: *A part of Vimy Ridge and the Canadian National Memorial as seen from La Chaudière in what was on April 9, 1917, German-occupied territory – photograph from 1915*)

On the days following, the 85th Battalion had been involved in a general advance, but on this occasion it was not to be rewarded with the same success as on April 9. On April 13 the 11th Brigade had been relieved and the 85th Battalion had subsequently been withdrawn, back to the *Bouvigny Huts* where it had been quartered in March. From this time forward, until the end of the *Great War*, having earned its place in the line with the capture of *Hill 145*, the Nova Scotia Battalion was to serve as a component of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

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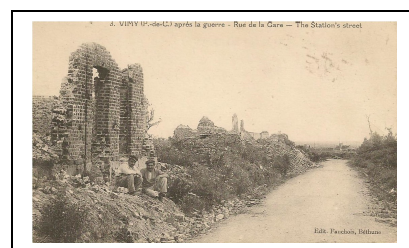
By April 18 the 85th Battalion had moved from the *Bouvigny Huts* to not-so-distant La Targette (also referred to as *Aux Reitz*). There it had been apprised that it was to replace the 73rd Battalion which would be disbanded on or about April 16. Two days later, on April 18, the War Diarist of the 85th Battalion was to make the following entry in his journal: *Transport of 73rd Bn. transferred to this unit.* On the next day again he had added: *More...personnel of 73rd transferred to this unit.*

(Right: *French and British Commonwealth dead lie in cemeteries at La Targette. – photograph from 2014*)



The unit was not to enjoy its respite for very long. On April 21 the 85th Battalion had been ordered from La Targette to *Canada Camp* at Chateau de la Haie; there, on the following day, it was to be further ordered to form part of a composite Canadian brigade which was to support a British attack. The unit was...*to be ready to move forward on half hours notice any time after 6 a.m. 23/4/17.*

The Battalion was left...*standing to...all that April 23 and presumably then all night before it moved forward at eleven o'clock on the next morning.* The move was not completed until three o'clock in the morning of the next day again, April 25, when it found itself in positions fronting the Lens to Vimy railway line.



(Right above: *The village of Vimy, some four kilometres away from the Ridge itself, as it was in 1919, just months after the cessation of hostilities – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right below: *Canadian troops under fire in the Lens Sector of the front during the spring or summer of 1917 – from Illustration*)

By that time, plans had apparently changed: for the remainder of that day - and the next - the unit was to spend most of its time digging a new front-line trench. A few *spare* hours were thereupon to be spent in simulating an attack on the German positions opposite, this in order to divert the enemy's attention from the adjacent sector where troops of the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions had been ordered to put in a real attack on April 28.



For its troubles on that April 26, the 85th Battalion had received much unwelcome artillery attention which was to result in a number of casualties.

This exercise in deception was to be repeated on April 28 after which the unit had retired into support positions on the following day, to an area where it would remain until May 2 when it had moved forward once more. On May 6 the Nova Scotia Battalion had been ordered withdrawn entirely from the forward area into reserve.

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During that four-day tour the 85th Battalion had not been involved in any infantry action, but its personnel had not been inactive – the Battalion War Diary records: *Work done during tour:- BADDECK TRENCH was completed – GRENADIER TRENCH was deepened – HALIFAX TRENCH improved – Block advanced – BORDEN TRENCH deepened and completed across the whole front. Casualties during tour – from 2nd the 6th inclusive – 2 OFFICERS and 20 Other Ranks*

The following days and weeks were to be spent in much the same manner: back and forth from reserve to the front-line trenches with time spent in-between the two in support. Casualties had been relatively light, almost all caused by enemy artillery fire. When not in the firing-line the Battalion personnel had supplied man-power for working-parties and carrying-parties.



And the weather for the most part had apparently decided to be...*fine and warm.*

(Right above: *A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many tasks allocated to troops when they were not manning the front lines: The use of the head-band - the 'tump'- was adopted from the North American indigenous peoples. – from Le Miroir*)

Thus it was, in early May of 1917 that the role of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) in the *First Battle of Arras* would sputter to its close.

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – as well as his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune down towards Lens.

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire in the Lens Sector during the late summer of 1917 – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The Canadian Corps would be a major contributor to the aforementioned operations in the area of Lens, the best-documented action of which was to be the confrontation fought at *Hill 70* by troops of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions. However, troops of the 4th Canadian Division – and thus the 85th Battalion - were not to be involved in this operation.

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. This successful operation showed the progress that had been recently made, particularly in artillery tactics. – photograph from 1914*)



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While not having been heavily involved in the Canadian-led summer campaign of 1917 in the mining area of the Lens-Béthune Sectors, the 85th Battalion had nonetheless by this time been slated to play its part in that other ongoing offensive, the one in Belgium, and once again in the *Ypres Salient* – in a battle that has come to symbolize the wretchedness of war. Any operations contemplated for the *Lens Front* were now to be cancelled.

Thus during the month of September, the 85th Battalion was to remain stationed in northern France, there awaiting its orders to move northwards.

After *Hill 70* the Canadians apparently had expected, and had planned, further action in the area; but to the north the ongoing *Third Battle of Ypres* was not proceeding according to expectations and the British were running out of reinforcements. The Canadians – and the Anzacs - were to be ordered to provide the necessary man-power.

(Right above: *Troops file from the railway station, through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres and past the vestiges of the venerable Cloth Hall on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

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

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign would come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.

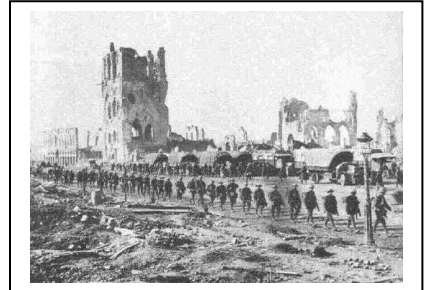
From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray, it would be they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. During the week of October 26 until November 3 it had been the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which were to spearhead the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

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

The 85th Battalion had been in action during the final two days of October and had incurred more than fifty per cent casualties among both officers and *other ranks*: a total of six-hundred eighty-eight had gone into action; three-hundred ninety-four were to become casualties.

The unit had been shattered.

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

The 85th Battalion had thereupon been withdrawn to the south from *Passchendaele* during the first week of November, 1917, and was to be once more back in France, in the area of Lens, there enduring the glamour of life in the trenches.

(Right below: *The monument to the 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders) which stands in a field by the side of the road from Zonnebeke to Passendale (Passchendaele) – photograph from 2014*)

By November 20, the 85th Battalion had withdrawn to the area of the commune of Raimbert, not far removed from the larger northern centre of Béthune. The time spent there behind the lines was to comprise the usual training, competitions, sports, lectures, church-parades, musketry, gas-drills, inspections, concerts, re-enforcements, working-parties... The list in the Battalion War Diary does go on...but the Diarist has omitted one event.

(Right below: *A photograph, from 1917, of a Canadian soldier during training in the use of his 'gas-helmet': As may be imagined, it was difficult for the wearer to perform the duties of a soldier, particularly in the event of an attack. – from Le Miroir*)

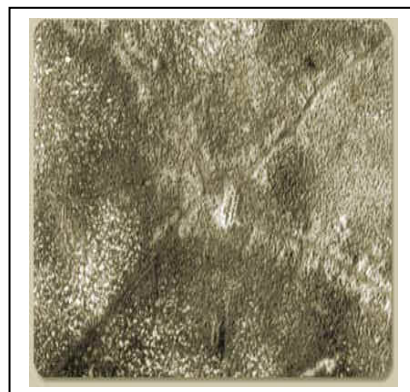
The month of December had offered something a little different – and a reminder of home - to all the Canadian military formations and units which had been serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were to be open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least some units, was to be in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to pay for it as well.*

The winter of 1917-1918 was for the most part to be a quiet period, much as had been the three previous winters of the *Great War*. The 85th Battalion War Diary suggests little offensive activity on the part of the unit and the number of casualties recorded per diem are few.

When it was to serve in the front line and in support positions, the 85th Battalion had been ordered into such sectors as Méricourt and Lens; when withdrawn into reserve – which it appears to have been for much of that winter – it had been posted to Château de la Haie, Souchez, Petit Servins and to Raimbert where it was, as seen some pages above, that Private Stevens was to report *to duty* with the unit.

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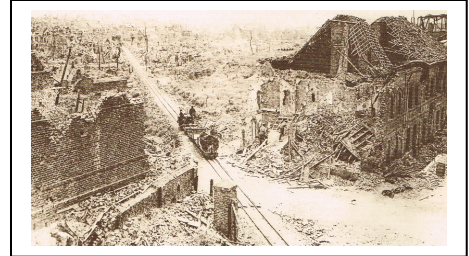
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(Right: *The village of Souchez in 1915, before the arrival of the British and Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)



On March 13 Private Stevens' 85th Battalion was ordered forward into support positions in the Cité St-Pierre, one of the several mining districts encompassing the city of Lens. On March 18 the unit moved up into the front line where it was still serving on the 21st, the first day of spring, 1918.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources have this photo as of the neighbouring community of Lievins - the sector where the 85th Battalion was serving, in March of 1918, but 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*)



Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the enemy then launched a massive attack, Operation 'Michael', on March 21.

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

The impressive German advance continued for some two weeks, but petered out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and much appreciated French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

****A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th and, temporarily, 34th Division. It was successful for a while, but was finally held by the end of the month.***

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Belgian Flanders during 'Georgette' in mid-April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



At first there was to be a great deal of indecision displayed by the British and Canadian High Commands and units were being transferred, often in a circular fashion, with orders given soon afterwards countermanded.

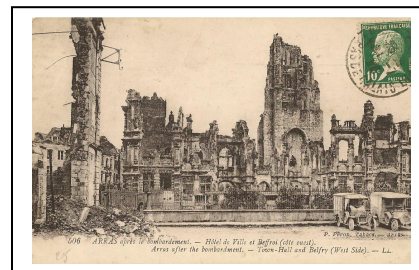
The object of these movements to the areas just south and to the south-west of Arras had been two-fold: to relieve and release British troops to fight further south; and to secure the area of Arras in case a further offensive was launched in the direction of the Channel ports or towards the coal-fields in the area of Béthune.

Arras later proved to be the northern limit of the German attack* – but of course, no-one on the Allied side at the time was to know that such was the case**.

**An German attack in the direction of Arras was stopped cold by the British Third Army before it reached the city.*

***During the entire spring period and into the early summer the Germans were also to be battering the French forces on various fronts.*

Canadian forces were therefore ordered into the Arras sectors to forestall any such eventuality, and at times the situation apparently – and perhaps understandably – became a little confused. Eventually the 85th Battalion found itself towards the end of March ordered into *the Neuville St-Vaast Sector* and into the area of St-Éloi, just north of Arras.



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

(Right and right below: *The village of Mont St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partly destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



Towards the end of that April a relative calm descended on the British front lines as the German threats both south and north faded – the offensives had won for the enemy a great deal of ground, but nothing of any real military significance had been gained in either of the two theatres of operation. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides had been exhausted and needed time to once more reorganize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

The Allies, from the point of view of available re-enforcements, were even so by now – and from this time on – to be a lot better off than were their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were now belatedly arriving on the scene. An overall Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive.



Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right above: *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*)

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If the front was quiet during the months of May, June and July – the everyday patrols and the occasional raid notwithstanding – the 85th Battalion, until July 25, was not in any position to know about it: it had not been even *close* to the forward area. The War Diarist has recorded the unit to have spent eighty-one consecutive days at various places in the rear area – Monchy-Breton, Valhoun, Lozinghem and Écoivres – in training and the like. It was not to be until July 25 that it eventually relieved the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front line, *Fampoux Sector*, just north-east of Arras.

Only six days after that July 25th move to the forward area, the 85th Battalion was on the move once more, having been relieved in turn on July 31 by a British battalion... *Proceeded by light railway to billets at AUBIN. The whole Corps is moving in a few days – in fact has started now. For where – no one knows but it looks like a big scrap ahead...* (Excerpt from the 85th Battalion War Diary entry for July 31, 1918)



(Right above and right below: *Écoivres Military Cemetery as it was at the time of - or just after – the Great War, and as it is a century later – from a vintage post-card and (colour) from 1915)*

On the morrow, August 1, the War Diarist of Private Stevens' 85th Battalion continued his journal as follows: *Fine. Word received regarding probable move by the whole Canadian Corps with a rumour of operations to follow. Nothing definite as to whether North or South*. Preparations being made for a quick move, as it has to be done on the Battalions (sic) own wheels.*



**It was to be south. However, a small number of Canadian units were to be sent in the opposite direction, north, back into Belgium with orders to make themselves as conspicuous as possible, this in order to give the impression of a major operation soon to be undertaken in that area.*

That August 8, a week after the 85th Battalion's departure from the area of Arras, would be the opening day of the Allied offensive, the greater part on this occasion British-, Commonwealth- and French-led which, in conjunction with other offensives elsewhere, were to result in the Armistice of November 11.

On the Allied side, this succession of battles was to become known to history as *the Hundred Days – Les Cent Jours*: what the Germans called it is less certain, although August 8 was to be, as far as Ludendorff – the German commander - was concerned, *the Black Day of the German Army (Der Schwartze Tag)*.

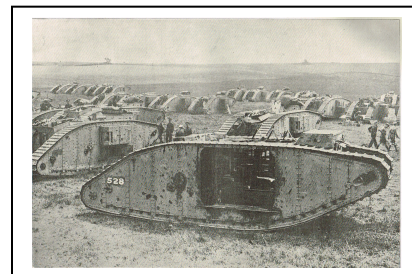
Just days before that August 8, the 85th Battalion had travelled south-west by train to disembark at Hangest-sur-Somme – about half-way between Abbéville and Amiens – and from there had marched some twenty-five kilometres westward to the smaller community of Vergies.

(continued)

This movement had taken place on August 3 and 4 by which time the Battalion War Diarist had become apprised of the reason for all this activity: *The scheme will be known as the L.C. (Llandoverly (sic) Castle) Operation, and will take place in a very few days, on a front of from 20 to 30 miles, East of Amiens, to a depth in places of eight miles.*

The show will be staged by the 3rd British Corps, Australians, Canadian Corps, and the 3rd French Army, all under Field Marshal, Sir Douglas Haig. The principal objective of the operation, to relieve the pressure on AMIENS.

(Right: *Tanks in ever-increasing numbers were to be used by the Allies in the last battles of the Great War. 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*)



At nine o'clock on the evening of August 4, Private Stevens and his Battalion had begun another long march of about twenty-eight kilometres to the eastward, to Briquemesnil, where it arrived at five in the morning of the 5th.

(Right below: *The historic 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(?)*)

Two days later again there had been a further overnight... *hard march...to the Bois de Boves, some nine kilometres to the south of Amiens. Yet another trek that night – August 7-8 – was to bring the unit to its assembly point in the Bois de Gentelles (Gentelles Wood) from where the Battalion attack of August 8 was to be launched on the following morning.*



Whereas the first part of the transfer had been accomplished mostly by train and by motor transport, the second part had been done by night marches, and had passed around to the west and then to the south of Amiens to keep the movement from the eyes of any German aviation observers. It worked: the Germans were totally taken by surprise.

Thus the assault was to prove an overwhelming success, with territorial gains rarely seen since the opening weeks of the war in 1914*. The 85th Battalion continued in its advance** until August 18 when the unit was relieved and ordered withdrawn into Divisional Reserve – yet still, it would seem, according to the unit's diary, within artillery range.

(Right: *August 8: captured positions on the Somme being consolidated by Canadian troops against a German counter-attack – from Le Miroir*)



****Perhaps the opening day of the Battle of Cambrai, November 20, 1917, and the German offensive of that spring of 1918 had been the exceptions to the rule.***

*****The advance was not, after the success of that first day, to be as rapid as planned. At the outset the Canadians and Australians, supported by tanks, had forged ahead; on the flanks the British and French, without that same support, had encountered considerable opposition. And on the second and third days, with many fewer tanks, the Canadian and Australian progress was to be much slower. The offensive was temporarily halted.***

The Battalion War Diarist reported twenty-seven killed and one-hundred fifteen wounded for the entire month of August, mostly in front of Amiens – still too many, to be sure, but far from those appalling figures at *Passchendaele*.

(Right: *In one of the many villages liberated from the Germans, Canadian and enemy wounded await evacuation to the rear. – from Le Miroir*)



The 85th Battalion was not to return to the forward area until the night of August 31-September 1 when the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade was again despatched to the front line.

But the forward area to which it was now sent was no longer the *Amiens Front*. By that time, and in just as much secrecy as three weeks prior, the entire Canadian Corps had been transported, by many of the same itineraries, back whence it had come and was already positioned on the new *Arras Front* and ready to deliver a fresh attack.

A first offensive in this area to the east of Arras was launched by Canadian and British Divisions during the final days of August. On September 2, having relieved some of those afore-mentioned Canadian battalions, units of the 4th Canadian Division - including Private Stevens' 85th Battalion - passed in turn to the offensive, attacking the trenches of the *Drocourt-Quéant Line* and advancing along the axis of the Arras-Cambrai road as far as, and then capturing, Dury village.

(Right: *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*)



Excerpts from the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) War Diary Appendices pertinent to the offensive operations of September 2, 1918:

...The task allotted to the 85th C.I. Battalion, NOVA SCOTIA HIGHLANDERS, was to break through the DROCOURT-QUEANT Line and DROCOURT-QUEANT Support Line...

(continued)



...The Battalion plan of operations was that there be six waves of two lines each...the first two waves of "D" and "A" Companies...whose objective was...(a part of)...the DROCOURT-QUEANT 4th Line system (1st day objective)...the 3rd and 4th waves, made up of "C" Company, allotted the task of cleaning up the area between the 1st objective...and support lines...and to capture and consolidate the latter.

The 5th and 6th waves made up of "B" Company, were to leapfrog "C" Company and capture...the Sunken Road...

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

Account of the Action:- At zero hour, 5.00 a.m., the Battalion jumped off as ordered, but as no Tanks had, up to that time, appeared of our Battalion frontage, "A" and "D" Companies cleared the area, which was held by a strong machine gun post, between the jump-off and the barrage line... These posts...were untouched by our artillery fire.



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

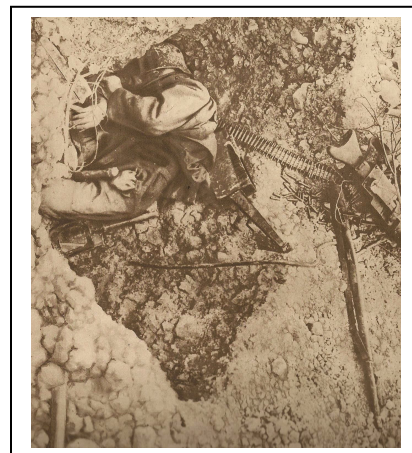
In passing over the first 300 yards of our advance the Battalion losses amounted to approximately 50% of our total casualties throughout the whole action... However, in spite of heavy opposition from numerous machine-guns, with the arrival of the tanks the first objective was reported as having been taken by a quarter past six that morning.

(Right: Douglas Haig, C-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front would later inspect Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir)



The second objective was to fall at seven-thirty, seventy-five minutes later: ...Particularly heavy direct and indirect machine-gun fire was here encountered, both from the flanks and from our direct front... The Bosche had established strong machine gun posts both in the Mill and its immediate vicinity, as well as along the Sunken Road...

The heavy enfilade fire became so intense that the attacking wave suffered heavy casualties... They pushed forward, assaulted and carried the final objective and established outposts... A heavy barrage from the enemy artillery was laid down on the final objective, causing considerable casualties, but no counter attack developed.



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

This line was held by the 85th Battalion until relieved by the troops of the 11th C.I. Brigade at 11.30 a.m., when the 85th Battalion was drawn back into their first objective, into Brigade Reserve...



(Right: *Dury Mill British Cemetery - The losses in these final campaigns were among the heaviest of the war: of the three-hundred thirty-seven dead interred in Dury Mill British Cemetery, only nine did not serve in a Canadian unit, and all but eighteen were to die on September 2 of 1918. – photograph from 2016*)

Private Stevens of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) of the Canadian Infantry was one of those who fell on that September 2, 1918.

The son of John Stevens, likely fisherman, deceased – possibly in March of 1907 - it was to his widowed mother named only as Mrs. John Stevens among his documents that he bequeathed his all in a Will penned on November 29, 1916.

Private Stevens was reported as having been *killed in action* during the fighting at and about the *Drocourt-Quéant Line* on September 2, 1918. He shares his last resting-place with Private J.F. Doane, also of the 85th Battalion, and who died on that same day.

Cyril Stevens had enlisted at the *declared* age of 24 years: date of birth at Clark's Beach, Newfoundland as registered on his Attestation Papers, September 3, 1892.

Private Cyril Stevens 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.

