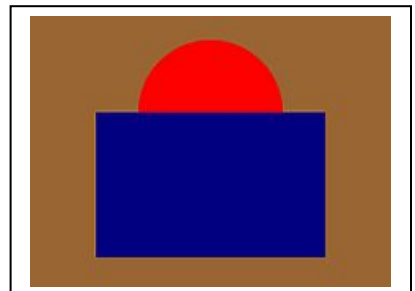




Private George William Stevens, Number 469510 of the 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Puchevillers British Cemetery: Grave reference IV.F.37.

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *checker* with the *Canadian Pacific Railway*, George William Stevens appears to have left little if any information behind him a propos his early years in the Dominion of Newfoundland or of his emigration to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was present in the capital city of that province during the month of August, 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted.

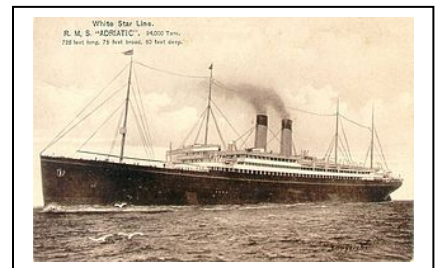
According to his earliest pay records, George William Stevens was first remunerated for his services to the Canadian Army on August 14 of 1915 and, on the same day, *taken on strength* in Halifax by the newly-formed 64th Battalion (*The Princess Louise Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

On the same August 14 he underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. Twelve days later, on the 26th day of the month, and by this time having been transferred to Sussex (see below), King's County, New Brunswick, he was then attested and his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

The formalities of Private Stevens' enlistment were brought to a close five days later again, on September 1, when the officer commanding the 64th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Montgomery Campbell declared – on paper – that...*W G Stevens...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Although partially recruited in Halifax, Nova Scotia, it appears that the personnel of the 64th Battalion was to train in the province of New Brunswick. *Camp Sussex*, already established – in 1885 - before the onset of the *Great War*, and where the Battalion had its Headquarters, was also to be the site for Private Stevens' unit to complete its preparations for *overseas service*. That service, however, was not to be called upon immediately, and there would be a period of more than seven months between the time of his enlistment and his departure from Canada in the spring of 1916.

Towards the end of March of 1916, Private Stevens was journeying back to Halifax. There, on the 31st day of that month, the thirty-eight officers and one-thousand eighty-eight other ranks of his Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Adriatic* for the trans-Atlantic crossing.



(Right: *The image of the White Star Liner Adriatic is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

The 64th Battalion was not to take passage alone to the United Kingdom: also on board ship were to be found the 73rd Battalion of Canadian Infantry, the 8th Canadian Field Ambulance and a draft of the Coburg Heavy Battery – for a total of twenty-four hundred thirty-seven military passengers.

Adriatic sailed on April 1, then docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool some eight days later, on April 9. To which Canadian military establishment the 64th Battalion was then transported is not clear, although it may have been *Shorncliffe* (see below).

All that may be said with any certainty is that the 64th Battalion was to serve only as a reserve pool and that by July of that 1916, only three months after having arrived in the United Kingdom, most of its personnel had been absorbed by other Canadian units*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas more than 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.*

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.

In the case of Private Stevens, for bureaucratic reasons he was transferred to the 12th Reserve Infantry Battalion of the CEF for four days: on June 24, 1916, he was *struck off strength* by the 64th Battalion and *taken on strength* by the 12th Reserve Battalion on that same day. This reserve unit was at the time stationed at *Cæsar’s Camp*, this encampment being a subsidiary of the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, on the Dover Straits and in close proximity to the harbour and town of Folkestone.



(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*)

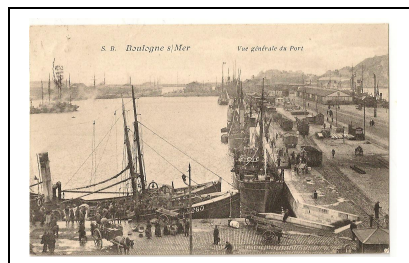
This sort of short-term transfer, often just bureaucratic, was to occur on many thousands of occasions during the *Great War* when Canadian re-enforcements travelled in transit from England to the Continent to their new units already serving on the *Western Front*. So it was with Private Stevens.



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

On June 28, having once again been transferred, on paper, to the 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*), at that time serving in Belgium - he crossed from Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite and some two hours’ sailing-time distant.

From Boulogne he was despatched southwards to the Canadian Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp*, established by that time in the area of the industrial port-city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

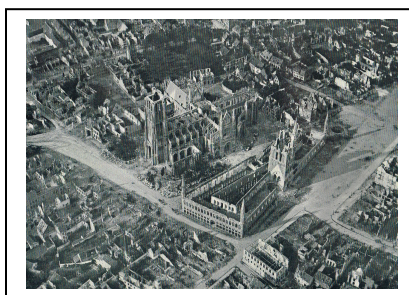
Private Stevens was then to spend thirteen days at Le Havre before he was then ordered northward on July 12 to join the 24th Battalion in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. He was reported as having done so two days later, on July 14.



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

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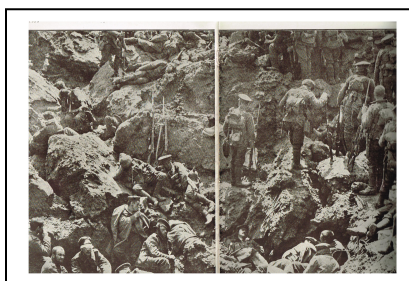
A component of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 2nd Division, the 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) was a Montreal-based unit with a history which dated back to 1862. After mobilization it had sailed to Great Britain from Canada in May of 1915, and had been transferred with the Division to France, then to the *Kingdom of Belgium*, in September of the same year. There it was to serve with the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade to the south of the *Ypres Salient* in a sector between the already battered city of Ypres and the Franco-Belgian border.



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

It was not to be until early April of 1916, more than six months following its arrival on the Continent, that the 2nd Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation. It would be at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27th day of March, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then followed up with an infantry attack. The role of the newly-arrived Canadian formation had then been to capitalize on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

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



Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory, by then having inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

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

The *Action of the St. Eloi Craters* had not been a happy experience for the novice Canadians. The 24th Battalion, however, according to its War Diary, had not been heavily involved and the majority of its casualties at the time had been due to artillery fire. Apart from repelling a German bombing party on April 15, the unit had been engaged in very little of the infantry action.

Six weeks following the episode at St-Éloi there had then been the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*. This had involved mainly the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division* but many other units, since the situation at times was to become critical, had subsequently played a role.

**The Canadian 3rd Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. However, unlike its two predecessors, it was formed on the Continent, some of its units having already been on active service there for months, others not to arrive until the late winter of 1916. Thus it was not until March of that year that the Division was capable of assuming responsibility for any sector. When it eventually did, it was thrust into the south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This had been in a sector to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway Dugouts*, *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: Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans would be unable to exploit their success and the Canadians had been allowed the time to patch up their defences. Sir Julien Byng's* hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piecemeal, poorly supported by artillery and poorly co-ordinated, was to be a horrific experience for the Canadians.



**The British-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps.*

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



The 24th Battalion would not play a leading part in the action at *Mount Sorrel*. Uninvolved during the early days, the unit had moved forward into the front-line trenches in the area of *Maple Copse* on June 7, there to remain until having been relieved on the 11th. Thus neither had it participated in the closing stages of June 12-13.

The Battalion was not to escape without casualties however.

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

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



Once again these had been caused mostly by German gun-fire, particularly at the time when it had been moving forward towards *Maple Copse* on June 7, one platoon having incurred twenty-three casualties in a single extremely heavy bombardment and thus having almost ceased to exist.

From the time of its withdrawal from the area of *Mount Sorrel* until the final week of August the 24th Battalion was to pass the early summer submitting to the rigours, routines and perils of life in - and out of - the trenches*. Often the war diaries of this period refer to *quiet days...front quieter than normal* – although, of course, everything is relative. After the exertions of *Mount Sorrel*, any infantry activity was to be on a local level, limited to patrols and raids, and most casualties had been due to artillery and to sniping.



(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 – any resemblance to a hill removed in 1917 by a mine detonated under its summit - to the south-east of Ypres, the area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014*)

*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*)

(continued)

It was, of course, during this summer period of 1916, more exactly at a time when the 24th Battalion was in the rear area near Dickebusch and supplying working-parties for a number of tasks – burying cables, digging trenches and carrying supplies - that Private Stevens reported *to duty* with his new unit on July 14*.

**His arrival is reported on Private Stevens' Active Service Form but not by the 24th Battalion War Diary either on or about that particular date.*

* * * * *

On August 26 Private Stevens' Battalion withdrew westward, entirely away from the *Ypres Salient* and the forward area, through the French border town of Steenvoorde to the vicinity of Éperlecques in north-western France, where new training grounds had been established by the British Army. The unit arrived there on August 28 and began to train on the following day.

Further to the south, the British summer offensive was not progressing as well as planned and losses had been heavy: help in the form of troops from the Commonwealth was already being ordered by the High Command*, thus the Canadian Corps' transfer to the area of Éperlecques. Apparently, the first item on the 24th Battalion's agenda immediately upon its arrival at the site was the acquisition of new rifles**.

(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 Dominion (Commonwealth) forces at this time were all operating under the overall command of the British High Command.*

***The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it jammed, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*

By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

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



(continued)

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

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been 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*) – as seen in a preceding paragraph - were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and the New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on and about August 30, now to become part of a third general offensive.

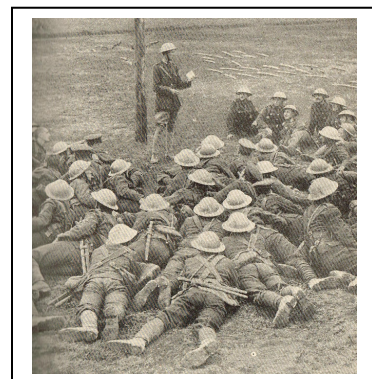


Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

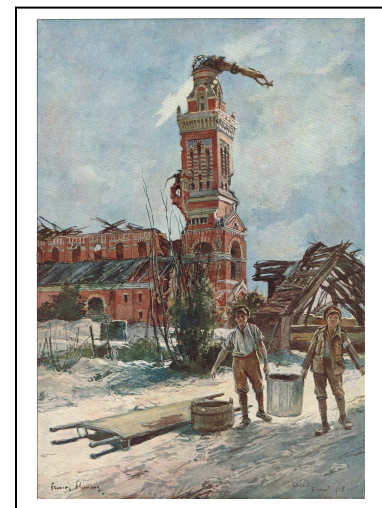
(Right above: *The village of Courcelette a century after 'First Somme', as seen from its northern outskirts* – photograph from 2017)

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

Meanwhile, on September 4, ten days after its retirement from Belgium, the 24th Battalion had left its billets at Eperlecques and had marched to the railway station at Arques. There it was to board a train for the journey to Conteville, just over one-hundred kilometres distant, to arrive at its destination at five-thirty on the following morning.



Later during the day of that same September 5, Private Stevens and his Battalion had started to march once more, to arrive some five days and fifty kilometres later at the large military encampment at the *Brickfields (La Briquetterie)*, in the proximity of the provincial town of Albert. There it would remain, providing working- and wiring-parties, until midnight of September 14 when it had moved forward to positions in the *Chalk Pits* for the attack of the morrow.



During the first two days of that offensive the 24th Battalion was as involved in the operation as much as was any other Canadian Battalion – it just was not shooting or bombing anyone. It was, however, carrying small-arms ammunition and bombs (*grenades*) to the forward areas for others to use, as well as Bengal Lights, flares, stretchers, rations...

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

Having then moved up into close support on the night of September 16-17, on September 17 the unit was ordered to deliver an attack on the German front line, an assault which was to begin at five-thirty in the afternoon.

The operation would bear mixed results – and heavy casualties - and after this action the War Diarist wrote the following scathing paragraph in his entry of that day: *With regard to this attack, if the Artillery preparation had been in any way adequate, there is no doubt but that the objective would have been obtained along the whole line. As it was, a barrage was put up approximately 500 yards in rear of the German front line, which merely served to warn the enemy that an attack would probably be launched, and they were able when our men advanced, to stand up on their parapets and shoot them down.*

By the 18th the Battalion had returned to *Brickfields Camp*: the unit's total casualties during those preceding days, of *all ranks*, had amounted to three-hundred twenty.

One of those badly wounded had been Private Stevens.

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

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



The exact date on which Private Stevens was wounded appears not to have been recorded in his dossier. While it is possible that he was injured in the days prior to the attack of September 17 – there were casualties almost each and every day – the numbers of killed, wounded and missing reported on that last occasion makes this time and place by far the most likely.

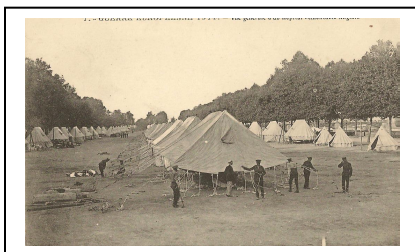
Having been injured – on whatever was the date – he was evacuated from the field and eventually taken to the 44th Casualty Clearing Station, at the time established at or in the vicinity of Puchevillers, a community some twenty kilometres to the north-west of Albert.

He was to be treated for shrapnel-wounds with multiple fractures to both legs.

(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were of a more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



(continued)



The son of William Stevens, sailor and agent, – to whom he had willed his all - and of Rose Emma (in a single further source recorded as *Rosannah*) Stevens (née *Poole*) of the District of Burgeo and La Poile, Newfoundland – the couple married at Burnt Islands in 1887 – he was brother to James-Henry and likely to Sarah-Elizabeth, and also to A.J. Stevens and N.D. Stevens found in the 1921 Census for Halifax, Nova Scotia – but both of them born in Newfoundland*.

**The parents and the two youngest children – the last two names noted above – according to the same Census, did not emigrate until 1920. This is supported if not confirmed in the attestation papers of 1915, where George William Stevens cites his father as next of kin and still living at the time in Port aux Basques, Newfoundland.*

Private Stevens was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 44th Casualty Clearing Station as having *died of wounds* on September 17, 1916.

George William Stevens had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-five years and seven months: date of birth at Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, February 6, 1890; a copy of parish records cites the place of birth as Hiscock’s Point.

Private George William 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.