Private Maxwell Stevens (Number 222921) of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bourlon Wood Cemetery: Grave reference I.E.6..

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

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *machinist*, Maxwell Stevens has left behind him little, if any, information pertaining to his early years living in the Dominion of Newfoundland which he apparently left in 1905 at the age of seven years – not only he, but his parents and his six siblings. The family soon became established in the community of Trenton, Pictou County, where the father was to find a job as a steel-worker; he, alas, was to succumb to typhoid fever only two years later, in 1908.

One last child was born in Nova Scotia, in 1906, and at some time after the passing of her husband, Mrs. Stevens moved residence to not-distant New Glasgow. This now having been said, however, there is little more to add to the history of fourth child Maxwell until the time of his enlistment in late 1915.

His first military pay records show that it was on October 15* of that 1915, that the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services. On the same paper it also documents that to be the date on which he was *taken on strength* by the 85th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*). A week later, on October 22, he was attested by Lieutenant Colonel N.H. Parsons, second-in-Command of the aforementioned Battalion.**

Two sources suggest that it might have been as early as October 5.

****Although the term was used at the time, perhaps somewhat surprisingly it was not to come into official use until the year 1940.***

Although this is not confirmed, these preliminary formalities likely took place in New Glasgow: it was then to be two months less a day, on December 21, before – now in Halifax – Private Stevens underwent a medical examination. This procedure found him…*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.*

It is somewhat fortuitous that he passed his medical test as, by that time, the formalities of his enlistment had been completed. It had been on the day before, December 20, that the Commanding Officer of the 85th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Borden, declared – on paper - that…*Maxwell Stevens…having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with correctness of this Attestation.*

The 85th Battalion had its headquarters in the *Armouries* at Halifax and it was here and on the adjacent Common that the unit began training as of October 14, 1915. While 'A' Company was to be quartered in the Armoury building itself, the other three such units were to inhabit tents for the next several months until huts had been constructed on the same Common – some unfortunates being obliged to spend all winter under canvas.

During this period Private Stevens was admitted into the Military Hospital, Halifax, for three weeks plus two days, from January 29, 1916, until February 21. Whatever the details of the episode were, they are not to be found among his papers: all that is recorded is that he was circumcised.

By the spring of 1917, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* 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 spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

On October 11 of 1916, the thirty-four officers and one thousand one *other ranks* of the 85th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. On that same day the 185th and the 188th Battalions were also to march on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.

(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 vessel* was to cast her lines and set her bow towards the open sea. One of the largest ships afloat at the time, for the trans-Atlantic passage *Olympic* was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18, six days later, and the troops disembarked on the following day. The 85th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the county of Surrey whereupon there were now to follow several more months of training.

The organizers who had organized the formation of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* had undoubtedly expected that it would serve as a whole in *active service* on the *Western Front*: this was not to be, the *Brigade* being disassembled in December of 1916. Three of its four battalions were now to remain in the United Kingdom, there to be employed as reserve units to furnish re-enforcements for the depleted Canadian battalions on the Continent.

The 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) was to be the exception*.

Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched 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.

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.

Forty-eight days after his arrival in the United Kingdom, on December 5 Private Stevens was transferred – on paper and on his pay records - to the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) and on the night of December 5-6 of 1916 he crossed over to France to report on that second date to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles in the vicinity of the French industrial city of Le Havre.

* * * * *

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

From this point in his military career until the end of February and beginning of March of 1917, it appears that Private Stevens spent his time at the Canadian Base Depot and did not report to his new unit. His pay records for that period show that it was there at Rouelles that he received his wages and his field allowance while the 13th Battalion was serving in sectors several hundred kilometres to the north-east.

During the last week of February, 1917, he was transferred once more, on the 25th day of the month, from the nominal roll of the 13th battalion to that of his previous unit, the 85th Battalion. Having then remained at the Canadian Base Depot for a further week, he was despatched on March 5 to a temporary posting with the 4th Entrenching Battalion. Private Stevens was one of a draft of one-hundred twenty-two other ranks – sixty-eight of whom were destined for the 85th Battalion – which arrived to report later on that same March 5 in the rear area of Villers-au-Bois.

For the following three days the newcomers to the Battalion joined those already there in three large working-parties which were occupied in road repair and construction. On March 8 Private Stevens' detachment was sent on its way to join the 85th Battalion; it was one fewer than when it had arrived to join the 4th Entrenching Battalion, one man having been wounded – concussed – while working on the La Targette road and admitted for treatment into the 11th Canadian Field Ambulance.

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*)

Private Stevens and the others of the draft are documented – but not by the 85th Battalion War Diarist - as having reported *to duty* on that same day at *Bouvigny Huts* where the unit had arrived to occupy its new billets on only the day before.

* * * * *

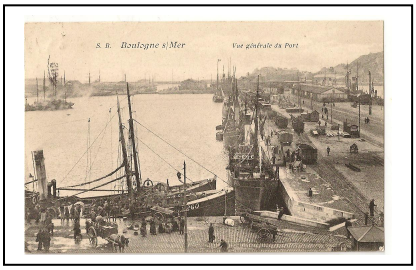
The 85th Battalion, having remained stationed at Witley during the more than two months during which Private Stevens had been at the Canadian Base Depot, had passed through the English-Channel port of Folkestone on February 10 of that 1917 to embark on His Majesty's Transport *London* for passage to the Continent.

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

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

By February 14 the unit had travelled inland to report to the vicinity of Gouy-Servins where it was to remain in training until the second day of March.

(Right below: *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 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 that the 85th Brigade would serve until *after* the action of April 9 on *Vimy Ridge*:

Excerpt from 11th Brigade War Diary: *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…*

In the meantime, two weeks and two days after having re-joined his 85th Battalion, on March 24 Private Stevens ran afoul of the formation's authorities for…*Untidy on 2/00 P.M. parade (Dirty rifle and puttees).* For this breach of military demeanour he was sentenced to seven days of Field Punishment Number 2.

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, the eve of the attack on *Vimy Ridge*. Private Stevens' unit apparently had been officially designated as a *working unit*, to be employed in reserve on the day of the assault, its tasks and duties to be things other than fighting. However, due to its Commanding Officer's insistence, it had nonetheless been undergoing exercises for several weeks before, training on prepared sites at the *Bouvigny Huts* - and in meticulous fashion – and its officers briefed on the upcoming operation.

This insistence on the part of Lieutenant-Colonel Borden, and these preparations, were to stand the 85th Battalion in good stead for what was to follow.

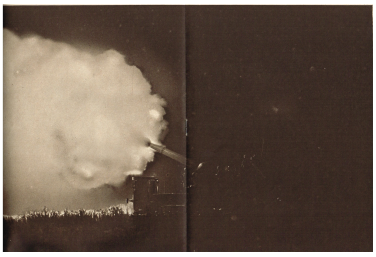
What followed, of course, was to be the Canadian attack of April 9, 1917 on *Vimy Ridge*, an operation in which the 85th Battalion was to play a conspicuous role late in the afternoon.

However, prior to this as yet unforeseen duty, the tasks of the 85th Battalion on that day were 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…

As the final days before the attack 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. Even while still at the *Bouvigny Huts*, the personnel of the 85th Battalion must have been well aware of the immensity of the operation – its first - which lay before it.

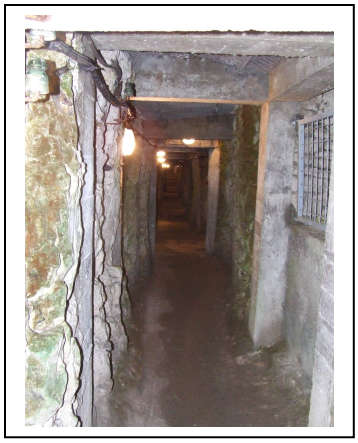
(Right below: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge*. – from *Illustration*)



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.

(Right below: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive not only in the vicinity of *Vimy Ridge*, but also in a large area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields of the previous year; this was the *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being that Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



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

(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, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(continued)

The attack on *Vimy Ridge* had taken place on the opening day of the five-week-long *Battle of Arras*. The days and weeks that followed were to be less auspicious than had been April 9 and 10, and the realities of life in the trenches took hold once more. That early success was not to be repeated until the summer of 1918.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, equipped – or 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*)

Then the caprices of war played a role. At three o'clock on the afternoon of April 9, the Commanding Officer 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 was also ordered to be in position with the rest of his command at half-past four in two of those well-known tunnels for further orders.

Those orders arrived thirty minutes early: *BATTER trench…is strongly held by fresh enemy…* (You) *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.* (Excerpts from 85th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)**

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

Apparently the objectives in question were known collectively as *Hill 145* which, once taken, was thereupon consolidated into a strong-point by the 85th Battalion. Today the Canadian National Memorial at *Vimy Ridge* stands atop it.

(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 April 13 the 11th Brigade was relieved and the 85th Battalion moved back to the *Bouvigny Huts* where it had been quartered in March. From this time forward, until the end of the *Great War*, it was to serve as a component of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade (see *Operational Order* two pages above).

(continued)

By April 18 the Battalion had moved from the *Bouvigny Huts* to not-so-distant La Targette (also referred to as *Aux Reitz*). There it found 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 made the following entry in his journal: *Transport of 73rd Bn. transferred to this unit.* On the next day again he added: *More…personnel of 73rd transferred to this unit.*

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

The unit was not to enjoy its respite for long. On April 21 the 85th Battalion moved from La Targette to *Canada Camp* at Chateau de la Haie; there, on the following day, it was 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: *After four years of conflict, this was what was to be left of the once-village of Vimy by the War's end*. – 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 spent most of its time digging a new front-line trench. A few spare hours were spent in simulating an attack on the German positions opposite in order to divert the enemy's attention from the adjacent sector where the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions were going to put in a real attack on April 28.

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

This exercise in deception was repeated on April 28 before the unit retired into support positions on the following day, to an area where it remained until May 2 when it moved forward once more. On May 6 the Battalion was withdrawn entirely from the forward area into reserve.

During that four-day tour the 85th Battalion and Private Stevens had not been involved in any infantry action but it – and he - 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 were relatively light, almost all caused, as ever, by enemy gun-fire. When not in the firing-line the Battalion personnel supplied man-power for working-parties and carrying-parties.

And the weather for the most part was apparently …*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* sputtered to its close.

The British High Command had decided well before this time to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium – the opening phase – the *Battle of the Messines Ridge* - was scheduled for the first week of June. 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 to Lens.

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing through No-Man's-Land under fire in the Lens Sector during the 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. Therefore, troops of the 4th Canadian Division – and thus of the 85th Battalion - were not to be involved in this operation other than peripherally.

(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)

(continued)

After *Hill 70* the Canadians apparently had expected, and had planned, further actions 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 re-enforcements. The Canadians – and the Australians and New Zealanders – would be ordered to provide the necessary man-power.

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps at this time is from Illustration*.)

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

(Right below: *The northern French city and mining-centre of Lens was to be the victim of four years of incessant bombardment – by both sides – and looked like this by the end of the conflict*. – from a vintage post-card)

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 *was* slated to play its part in that other ongoing offensive, the one in Belgium, and once again in the *Ypres Salient* – a battle that has come to symbolize both the savagery and the pity of war.

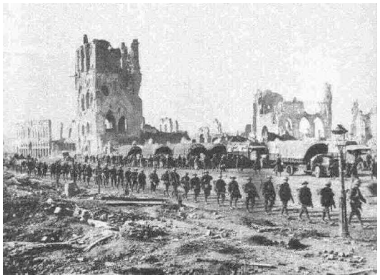
Thus during the month of September, the 85th Battalion, while awaiting further orders, was still stationed in northern France, in training, in taking care of the everyday business of trench warfare and in otherwise preparing for its role in what would prove to be one of the most murderous battles in history.

Apart from the activities documented in the preceding paragraph, Private Stevens was also occupied otherwise: On September 13, while his unit was serving at Petit Servins, he chose to absent himself from the Commanding Officer's parade held at twenty minutes before nine in the morning; for this he was sentenced to forfeit three days' pay.

On that same September 13 he was also awarded seven days of Field Punishment Number One for…*WOAS* (while on active service) *Disobeying an order leaving camp without permission.* This penalty also entailed a loss of his pay – one dollar per day – and also his daily field allowance of ten cents during those seven days, a total of seven dollars and seventy cents.

On a more positive note, Private Stevens was now granted ten days' leave which, however, was due to commence on September 18, during the period of his Field Punishment which, of course, would take precedence. It would appear that he was nevertheless to be allowed to enjoy his furlough, the person responsible having been kind enough to delay the date of his departure – to an unrecorded destination – and also that of his return.

(continued)



(Right: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917*. – from *Illustration*)

That return was on October 1 to an 85th Battalion, now in *Zouave Valley*, which was still awaiting orders to move north into Belgium. There were yet a further twelve days to pass before the call was to come.

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

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking 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 entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. During the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded 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 true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

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

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

Having left the area of Bruay by train on October 12 for billets at Staples in northern France, the Nova Scotia Highlanders unit was there to wait a further eleven days before having been transferred by bus from there to *St. Lawrence Camp* in the area between the Belgian town of Poperinghe and the smaller community of Brandhœk.

A further five days were now to pass before, on October 28, the Battalion was moved by rail to Ypres to then cross the ruins of the place and file past the vestiges of the *Cloth Hall* (see image on previous page)…*and marched to POTIJZE and had supper there; issued bombs etc., there and marched off, passing the starting corner…where guides met the Battalion at 4.45 p.m. Proceeded to the front line…* (Excerpt from Appendix A of the Battalion War Diary for October, 1917)

(continued)

October 30, 1917 – *At Zero hour the first sound heard was the Brigade machine guns. On this all Companies pushed forward. They had hardly gotten clear of the tapes before they were met by heavy machine-gun and rifle fire from the direction of the enemy front line all the way along our front and from a portion of DECLINE COPSE South of the Railway, and from machine guns in the vicinity…*

***This machine-gun and rifle fire was taking place while our barrage was supposed to be playing on the enemy's front line. There was a continuous sheet of machine-gun bullets, and it is the opinion of all who took part in the attack that the first barrage on the 85th Bn's front was not only very light, but that very little, if any, of it fell on our side or on the enemy's trench*.**

(Right: *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) in the area of which the unit had advanced* – photograph from 2014)

The three Companies advanced, providing their own covering fire with rifle-grenades, Lewis guns and rifle fire until they had passed our old front lines. Then in No Man's Land, a fierce fire fight took place. The rear waves pushed up and got their Lewis guns into action, while the rifle-grenadiers barraged the enemy's front line, which was quite evident and could plainly be seen, strongly manned by the enemy. The line was drawn closer and closer to the enemy by the men jumping from shell-hole to shell-hole but anyone who attempted to walk upright instantly became a casualty. There were several instances of this…

***The fire fight continued for, some say ten minutes, and some say half an hour…*(Excerpt from Appendix A of the Battalion War Diary of October, 1917)**

Thus passed the first minutes of the attack on the morning of October 30. The first objective was reported to have been taken at just after half-past six that morning but the situation remained far from stable: enemy artillery was fierce, counter-attacks were forthcoming and re-enforcements were necessary.

It was not to be until the evening of October 31 that the 85th Battalion was relieved. By that time it 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 had become casualties.

The unit was shattered.

(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge* – photograph from 2015)

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

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: *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 offered something a little different – and an undoubted reminder of home - to all the Canadian military formations and units which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were 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.

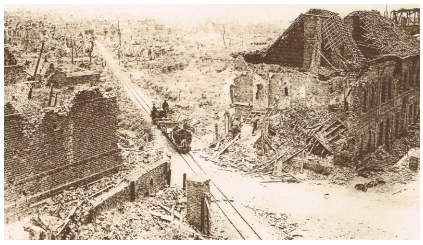
The winter of 1917-1918 was for the most part to be a quiet period, much as had been the three previous winters of the *Great War*. The 85th Battalion War Diary suggests little offensive activity on the part of the unit and the number of casualties recorded per diem are low.

When it served in the front line and in support positions, the 85th Battalion was ordered into such sectors as Méricourt and Lens; when withdrawn into reserve – which it appears to have been for much of that winter – it was posted to Château de la Haie, Souchez, Petit Servins and to Raimbert.

(Right below: *The village of Souchez as it was already by mid-1915, before the arrival of the British and Canadians to 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 many 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.

The first day of spring: Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory during the first six weeks of that spring of 1918. Having transferred westwards the large number of divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the *Great War*, the enemy then launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.



(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources have this image as being of Liévin, just to the west - 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 and Canadians uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area*. – from *Le Miroir*)

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 appears to have been 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.

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.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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 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 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 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 below: *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)

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: 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 85th Battalion entry for July 31, 1918)

(continued)

(Preceding page 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.

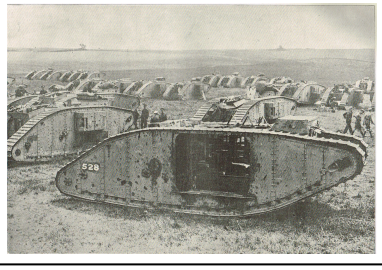
That August 8, a week after the 85th Battalion's departure from the area of Arras, would be the opening day of the Allied offensive, the greater part on this occasion British-, Commonwealth- and French-led which, in conjunction with other advances, was to result in the Armistice of November 11.

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.

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. (Llandovery* (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.*

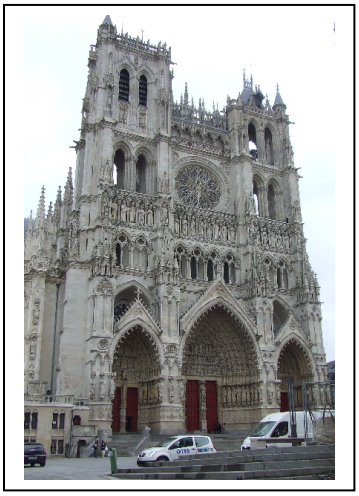
The show will be stages by the 3rd British Corps, Australians, Canadian Corps, and the 3rd French Army, all under Field Marshal, Sir Douglas Haig. The principal objective of the operation, to relieve the pressure on AMIENS.



(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, the 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.

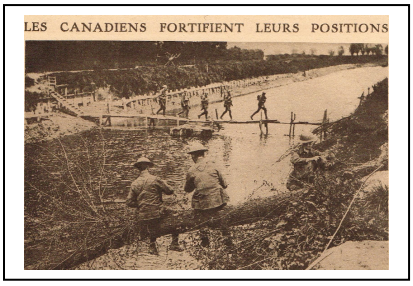
(Right below: *The historic gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918* – photograph from 2007(?))



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 Private Stevens' Battalion 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 Battalion War Diarist reported twenty-seven killed and one-hundred fifteen wounded for the entire month of August – 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 despatched to the front line.

But the forward area to which it was sent was no longer on 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, by then, it was already positioned on the new *Arras Front* and ready to deliver a further attack.

A first offensive in this area to the east of Arras had already been launched by Canadian and British Divisions during the final days of August. On September 2, units of the 4th Canadian Division - including Private Stevens' 85th Battalion - passed to the offensive, attacking the trenches of the *Drocourt-Quéant Line*, 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…

…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…

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.***

SIR DOUGLAS HAIG FÉLICITE DES CANADIENS QUI SE SIGNALÈRENT A LA PRISE DE QUEANT
L'honneur de marcher à l'assaut de la forteresse de Quéant, véritable pivot de la défense allemande, avait été réservé aux Canadiens du général Pergusson. Le soir ils purent inscrire 10,000 prisonniers sur leur tableau.

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 above: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects 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.

(Right above: *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)

On the following day, the push continued virtually unopposed for a further six-and-a-half kilometres, some units advancing as far as the *Canal du Nord*.

(Right: *The Canal du Nord almost a century later, at a point where it intersects the main Arras-Cambrai Road. The construction of the Canal was in fact still not completed at the time and parts of it were dry*. – photograph from 2015)

On September 5 the unit retired, although to where *exactly* appears not to be documented. On the 8th the Battalion retired even further, to the area of Wailly south-west of Arras, to a hutted camp which, for the obvious reason, was known as *Wailly Huts*.

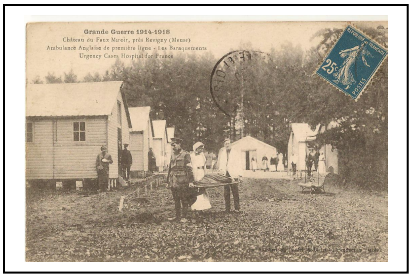
Excerpt from 85th Battalion War Diary entry for September 17, 1918: *C.O. was called to a conference at Brigade in the Afternoon and, as had been expected, brought back word of another show… This operation has, as its ultimate objective, the city of CAMBRAI…*

(continued)

The 85th Battalion was to remain in the area of Wailly until September 25. Apparently there were several other Canadian Battalions in the neighbourhood as the War Diary records a baseball game being played just about every day – games from which, for the most part, the 85th Battalion team seems to have emerged victorious.

On September 25 the 5th Battalion moved from its quarters at Wailly Huts to board a train. The War Diarist of the day takes up the story: …*the Battalion marched off at 5.30 p.m. arriving at Supply Station, ARRAS, at 7.00 o'clock. Battalion due to entrain at 8 p.m., but no word of the train had been received. Battalion was quartered in one of the large freight sheds in the station, with the rest of the Brigade in the surrounding buildings.*

About 11.30 p.m. enemy aircraft came over and dropped a bomb in the yards about 2 feet from the edge of the building where the Battalion was quartered, killing 1 Officer and 9 other ranks and wounding 1 Officer and 53 other ranks. The wounded were immediately evacuated and the Padre was left behind to look after the burial for the Battalion.



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

Due to this incident and others elsewhere, it was late the following morning, September 26, before the Battalion arrived in its staging area. Some thirteen hours later, by half-past midnight of that night of September 26-27, Private Stevens' unit had moved forward to the vicinity of Inchy-en-Artois to its assembly position.

Only hours later the Canadians were to storm and force the crossing of the Canal du Nord.

(Right above: *The Canal du Nord looking towards the area of the crossings undertaken on September, 1918* – photograph from 2015)

Excerpts from the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade report on the *Bourlon Wood Operation* of September 27, 1918, to be found in the Brigade War Diary and also from the 85th Battalion War Diary, Appendix '*Cambrai*', to be found in the entry for the month of October, 1918:

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

***Assembly was completed by 4.10 A.M.* (Brigade)**

***ZERO hour was 5.20 A.M. 27th September 1918* (Brigade)**

(continued)

The task of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade was to leap frog the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade on the RED Line…and clear the area up to and make good the BLUE LINE – then push patrols forward to gain a footing in the MARCOING LINE. The area allotted to this Brigade included the remaining trenches of the MARQUION LINE, the trench system around BOURLON, the Village of BOURLON, and the Railway within the Brigade Boundary… **(Brigade)**

…at fifteen minutes after Zero, Battalion jumped off in two lines of single Companies. On account of the heavy shelling of the tracks…the Battalion was to pass through INCHY WOOD and the Town of INCHY. In moving across the Canal touch was lost for a considerable time between the leading and rear Companies on account of heavy shelling. The Battalion also encountered considerable quantity of gas near the Canal…no casualties resulted… As soon as the Battalion passed the Canal, re-organization was effected and the advance was continued in Artillery…formation… **(Battalion)**

…The advance was continued and considerable machine gun fire was encountered from the heights in front of BOURLON WOOD and the Battalion reached the RED LINE at about 7.45 a.m. The barrage was timed to lift from the trench forward of the RED LINE at 8.16, but it appeared to lift very soon after the Battalion reached the RED LINE, and the forward Companies pushed on to reach their objective in the remainder of the MARQUION SYSTEM…and just East of BOURLON Village. They were led by the Tanks and seemed to have no difficulty as far as the barrage was concerned and pushed forward. **(Battalion)**

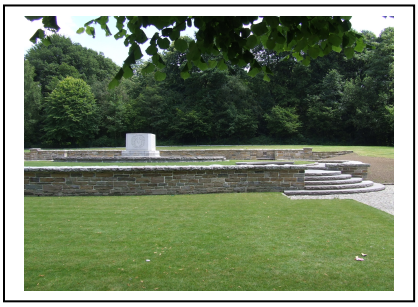
(Right above: ***Almost one hundred years after the Great War, a German's eye view from the heights of Boulon Wood of the ground over which the Canadians advanced on September 27, 1918*** **– photograph from 2015)**

The remainder of the MARQUION SYSTEM was carried with small resistance but with a considerable number of casualties resulting from enemy shelling and machine gun fire from BOURLON WOOD. The leading Companies continued the advance, when it appeared as if the 18-pound barrage came back again to just forward of the RED LINE and caused numerous casualties among the men of these Companies. **(Battalion)**
The leading Platoons had gotten so far forward that they were entirely ahead of the barrage and succeeded in capturing B Trench behind the Tanks and getting under cover before the barrage reached them. The remaining Platoons suffered heavy casualties from our barrage…and were forced to take cover and wait for the barrage to lift… **(Battalion)**

…The three Tanks…now turned and came back through it…and…turned around again and led the rear Platoons of "B" and "C" Companies and the whole of "A" and "D" Companies against the Town. Very little resistance was encountered in the Town and the Battalion was able to report the GREEN LINE established on the Eastern outskirts of the village at 9.45 a.m., just as soon as the barrage permitted the gaining of the objective… The enemy now began to shell the Town very heavily, inflicting severe casualties particularly of "A" Company. **(Battalion)**

***…the left flank of our position was threatened by large bodies of the enemy on the crest of the hill…and "B" and "C" Companies were brought up to support this flank. This…was held during the afternoon under constant machine-gun and rifle fire from the crest of the hill, and several attempts by the enemy to advance down the hill were repulsed by our fire…*(Battalion)**

(Right below: *The monument to the sacrifices of September 27, 1918, made during the taking of Bourlon Wood, stands on the heights overlooking the village for which the Woods are named.* – photograph from 2015)



In many cases there is to be found a casualty report among Canadian Military Records a propos the circumstances of a soldier's death. In the case of Private Stevens, however, this is not so; all that may be said – and even then perhaps without absolute certainty – is that he was killed during the time of the events recounted above.

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

The son of Azariah Stevens (originally from Bareneed, Port de Grave, deceased October 5, 1908), latterly steel-worker*, and of Julia Ann Stevens (née *Russell*) of St. John's, Newfoundland, before Trenton and New Glasgow (after her husband's death), Nova Scotia, he was also brother to Barrington, Maud, Etta, William-Booth, Margaret-Pearl, Graham-Russel (sic) and to Florie-Julia.**

Perhaps storekeeper at 65, Brazil's Square, in St. John's (from 1898 Business Directory)

****To his mother, as of October 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay and to her also, in a Will dated November 30, 1916, he had bequeathed his all.***

Private Stevens was reported as having been *killed in action* during the fighting on the day of the crossing of the Canal du Nord, September 27, 1918.

Maxwell Stevens had enlisted at the *apparent* age of eighteen years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, December 25, 1897 (from attestation papers). However, the *original* 1911 Census records the year of his birth as having been 1899.

Private Maxwell 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 24, 2023.