

Private Thomas Arthur Strobridge (also found as Strowbridge), Number 415983, of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate: Reference – Panels 26 – 30.

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

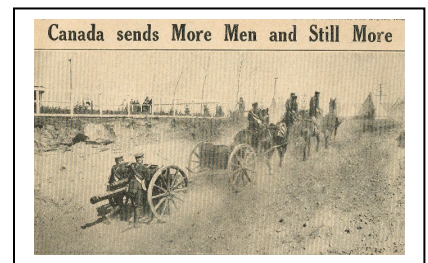
(continued)

His occupations prior to military service recorded as having been those of a fisherman then *miner*, Thomas Arthur Strobridge appears to have left behind him little information of his early years in the south-coast community of Belleoram in the Dominion of Newfoundland. Of his emigration from there to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, it is possible that he was the Thos. Strowbridge (sic) to be found of the passenger list of the SS *Lintrose* for its voyage of March 30, 1914, from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, Cape Breton Island. All else that may be said with any certainty is that he was present in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney – likely having moved there to find work - in August of the year 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

While most service files include various pay records which are then available to confirm the date – or otherwise – of a soldier’s enlistment, this is not the case with Private Strobridge. It is a later document, his *Active Service Form*, which cites August 13, 1915, as the day of this event; this is also the date on which he presented himself in Sydney for a medical examination – a procedure which found him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. Two days afterwards, while still in Sydney, Private Strobridge underwent attestation, his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

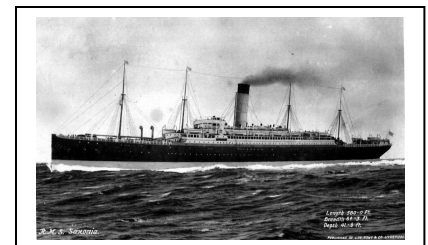
It is likely that after his enlistment in Sydney Private Reid was sent directly to the military encampment at *Valcartier Camp*, Québec, for it was there that he underwent the remainder of the necessary formalities*: these came to an official conclusion on August 16, when the Officer Commanding the 40th Battalion, Major – soon-to-be Lieutenant-Colonel - A.G. Vincent, declared – on paper – on the sixteenth day of that same month, that...*Thos. Reid...having finally been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**The 40th Battalion had been mobilized on May 11 of 1915 at Camp Aldershot in Nova Scotia and had undergone its early training there, but it had then been relocated to Camp Valcartier in Québec on June 21. Thus as suggested above, it may very well be that Private Strobridge travelled there, to Québec, during the three-day period after his enlistment and attestation.*



(Right above: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location not far from Ottawa – and also at some distance from any port – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – photograph (from a later date in the War) from *The War Illustrated*)*

Two drafts from the 40th Battalion had already sailed before the parent unit itself crossed the Atlantic, but these forces were seemingly used upon arrival in England as reinforcements for other units already serving on the Continent. It was on October 18, 1915, that Private Strobridge and the main body of the Battalion took ship in the port of Québec – in the company of the 41st Battalion of Canadian Infantry – embarking onto His Majesty’s Transport *Saxonia**.



****For some six months during the early days of the Great War, the vessel had served to accommodate German prisoners of war. In March of 1915 she then had reverted to service as a troop transport.***

(Preceding page: The image of the Royal Mail Ship Saxonía is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

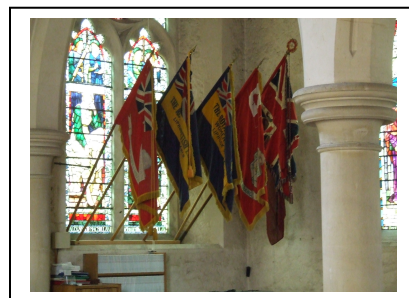
The vessel sailed on the same date, to dock in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport ten days later, on October 28. Private Strobridge's 40th Battalion was then transported by train to the fledgling Canadian military camp then being established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which latter community the camp owed its name - in the southern English county of Hampshire.



The 40th Battalion was apparently the first Canadian unit to be stationed there.

(Right above: The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it was almost a century after the Great War – a lot less busy nowadays - photograph from 2013)

(Right: Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016)



But for exactly how long the unit *remained* posted at *Camp Bramshott* is not clear – although it was long enough for him to have been hospitalized at Frensham in the adjacent county of Surrey from November 18 to 30, there to receive medical attention to a case of *la grippe*, commonly known these days as the 'flu.

The 40th Battalion, originally destined to be a unit of 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the soon-to-be 3rd Canadian Division, apparently soon afterwards was to be transferred eastward to the Kentish coast, to *Shorncliffe*. There the unit would be re-designated as the 40th Reserve Battalion*.

****Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas just over two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had aspirations of seeing active service in a theatre of war.***

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 these were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.



(Preceding page: *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*)

It was then to be on the night of March 15-16 of 1916 that Private Strobridge would cross the English Channel – most likely from nearby Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne of the coast opposite – as one of a re-enforcement draft. Upon its arrival in France the detachment proceeded southwards by train to *Rouelles Camp*, the newly-established Canadian Base Depot in the area of the industrial port-city of Le Havre.



(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of 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*)



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



Private Strobridge was one of the twelve-hundred eighty-eight *other ranks*, accompanied by seventeen officers, to arrive from England at *Rouelles Camp* on that March 16, whereupon he was taken on strength by the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) which was by that time already serving on the Continent.

Normally the newcomers were then to undergo several days of final training and organization; however, on this occasion, according to the Depot War Diary entry of March 16: *The draft which arrived today will not go to the Central Training Camp but will proceed direct to Canadian Corps H.Q...*

Thus only two days later, on March 18, the Depot War Diary entry for the day read: *Draft of 1605 other ranks and 12 conducting officers to the front at 2.30 this afternoon. This was a very fine looking draft...*

On the following day again, March 19, it was the turn of the 25th Battalion War Diarist to report in his journal: *49 O.R. Reinforcements arrive*. Private Strobridge had reported to *active service* with his new unit.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some six months by the time of Private Strobridge's arrival to serve with his new unit, since mid-September of the year 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front*.

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

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



The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916. That period, for the most part calm, was nonetheless to be interspersed with two infantry engagements, in April and in June, and as noted in a not-distant previous paragraph, by the arrival at the Battalion of Private Strobridge on March 19.

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It was not to be long before Private Strobridge was to experience the routines and perils of existence in the trenches* of the *Great War*, the 25th Battalion posted at that time in the St. Éloi sub-Sector. On March 20, less than twenty-four hours after he had reported to the Battalion, the unit moved back up into the forward area.

Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary for March 20, 1916: *Battalion relieved the 24th, 7 O.R. Wounded. Enemy artillery quiet. M.G. and rifle fire active. A few bombs & grenades fell into our front line, 7 O.R. Wounded. Our grenade platoon fired 27 grenades with good effect.*

**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)

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

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



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

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



(Right: *German bunkers from the period of the Great War, today serving as cattle-shelters, are still to be found a century later in the area of Sint-Elooi (St-Éloi), Belgium. – photograph from 2015*)

(Right: *Some of the countryside in the area of which the ‘Action of the St. Éloi Craters’ was fought almost a century beforehand. The crater is one of those detonated on the opening day of the ‘Battle of the Messines Ridge’ in the first week of June, 1917. – photograph from 2015*)



The following is the entire 25th Battalion War Diary entry of April 14, 1916: *Enemy attacked No 4 Crater coming over about 22 strong were repulsed by us with M Guns and bombs leaving a great many dead & wounded. This Crater was garrisoned by Lieut. E. Morgan and Lieut. L.H. Johnstone 35 O.R. Our Casualties being 8 Killed & 6 Wounded in the Crater.*

Our casualties in No 5 Crater were 3 Killed and 8 Wounded. Shelling still very heavy on craters, front line and support trenches. Total casualties during tour in front line 2 officers shell shock – Killed 18 O.R. Wounded 142 O.R.. Battalion relieved by 24th during night 14, 15. Copies of Garrison reports attached.*

**There appears to be no reason for the inconsistencies of the casualty counts.*

(continued)

One of the casualties was Private Strobbridge.

The son of Samuel Strowbridge (sic*) former fisherman, deceased from cancer on December 26, 1902, and of Mary Ann Strowbridge, deceased March 3, 1911, of Belleoram, Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Emma (married *Hardy*), to Laura-Rachel, to Susan-Elizabeth and to Frederick*.

**Strowbridge in parish records, Strobbridge on his gravestone.*

**Private Frederick Strowbridge (sic), Number 414943, of the 40th Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force; then 2n Battalion Canadian Pioneers; then 6th Brigade, Canadian Engineers. Having had a hand badly burned in an accidental explosion in October of 1918, Private Strowbridge survived the Great War.*

(Right above: A family memorial which stands in St. Lawrence Anglican Cemetery on the outskirts of the Newfoundland community of Belleoram commemorates the sacrifice of Thomas Arthur Strobbridge. – photograph from 2016)

(Right: The War Memorial in Belleoram honours the dead of both the World Wars. – photograph from 2016)

Private Strobbridge was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 14 of 1914. He was then reported as having been buried in...*St. Éloi Cemetery 3 mls (miles) S (south) of Ypres.* However, either his place of burial was subsequently forgotten or incorrectly recorded, or it was destroyed in later fighting, thus he is honoured on the Menin Gate.

Thomas Arthur Strobbridge had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-two years and ten months: date of birth in Belleoram, Fortune Bay, Newfoundland, (from attestation papers) October 27, 1893; however, the original Newfoundland Birth Register cites the year as having been 1892.

Private Thomas Arthur Strobbridge 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.