

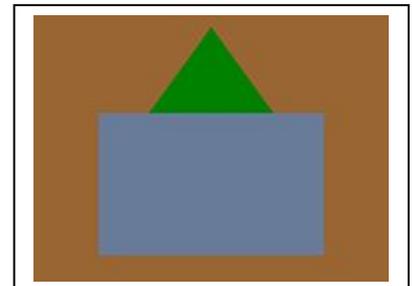


**Private James Douglas Thistle, Number 418758\* of 'A' Company of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) is buried in Greenwich Cemetery: Grave reference 3."C".Z.87..**

***\*Archives Canada recognizes only A18758.***

***(Right: The image of shoulder flash of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)***

**(continued)**



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *shoemaker*, Douglas\* Thistle appears to have left behind him few details of his early life in the Dominion of Newfoundland and of his movement to the Canadian province of Québec. The 1921 Census cites his mother and his young sister as having emigrated in 1913\*\* so it may well be that he did likewise at the time, although there appears to be no documentation to that effect.

*\*He has not used the name 'James' on any of his papers and Archives Canada does not recognize it.*

*\*\*By this time they had moved from Montreal to the area of Calgary.*

All else that may be said for certain is that Douglas Thistle was a resident in the city of Montréal during the month of December, 1914, and also May of 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted - twice.

December 3 was the date of his medical examination, enlistment and attestation when he was *taken on strength* by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Reserve Park of the Canadian Army Service Corps. However, at the end of the month of March, on the 26<sup>th</sup>, Private Thistle was *struck off strength* as being *medically unfit* and thus the unit sailed without him in May to the United Kingdom. There appear to be no further details.

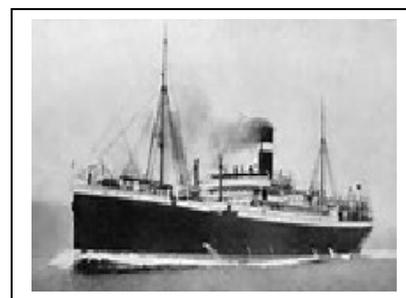
His second enlistment came about on May 1, 1915, on which day he also underwent a further medical examination which found him, despite the events of the previous March 26, to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. It was then perhaps two days later – March 3 the day on which he was *taken on strength*, and began to be remunerated by, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) – that the soon-to-be commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel George Stephen Cantlie, then declared (on paper) that...*Douglas Thistle...having been finally approved and inspected by me...I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*. This final paper was left un-dated\*.

*\*His two attestation papers show some minor discrepancies: on that of December 3 he declares his mother's name to be Maria and that he was at the time serving in the 13<sup>th</sup> L S (Scottish Light?) Dragoons of the Canadian Militia; the paper of May 1 records his mother's name as Annie and he has declared to have had no prior affiliation with any military unit whatsoever.*

Given that the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion mobilized and recruited in Montreal – and later sailed from there for overseas – it is likely - but yet to be confirmed - that this is also where Private Thistle and his fellow recruits trained until their departure in June of that 1915.

The vessel onto which the ten officers and nine-hundred seventy-eight *other ranks* of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion embarked on June 10 was His Majesty's Transport *Hesperian*.

Also taking passage overseas to the United Kingdom on board the ship were the 1<sup>st</sup> Drafts of the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles, of the 13<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles and also of the 37<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry.



**(Preceding page: The photograph of the Allan Line vessel *Hesperian* is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Not long after transporting Private Thistle across the Atlantic Ocean, she was torpedoed off Ireland – on September 4, 1915 – to sink two days later. Thirty-two lives were lost.)**

***Hesperian* sailed on that same date, to dock nine days later, on June 19, in the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport. From there the unit was transferred by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, then being established on the coast of the county of Kent.**



**(Right: 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)**

**The complex comprised a number of subsidiary camps, the entirety designated as *Shorncliffe*. It was situated on the Dover Straits, in the close vicinity of the English Channel town and harbour of Folkestone through which a large number of Canadian Expeditionary Force units passed during the *Great War* en route to the Continent and the *Western Front* after having undergone a period of training\*.**

**Private Thistle and the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were no exceptions to the rule. After a likely few days of quarantine – officially for all newcomers from Canada – and the regulation fourteen weeks of training before being pronounced as prepared for *active service*, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion marched to the pier at nearby Folkestone on October 9 of 1915 and embarked for the short Channel crossing to the port of Boulogne on the far coast.**



**But not before Private Thistle had spent two weeks plus a day in hospital. On July 5 he was sent to the *Shornecliffe Military Hospital* from where, having been diagnosed as suffering from a venereal complaint, he was forwarded on the same day to the *Tent Hospital* – logically called thus since it was all under canvas – on St. Martin’s Plain. After treatment, on July 20, he was discharged back to his unit\*.**

***\*It was Army policy that soldiers hospitalized with venereal complaints forfeit some of their income to at least partially compensate for their treatment. This usually amounted to sixty cents per day – from a private soldier’s daily income of one dollar ten cents. However, in the case of Private Thistle, his pay records show that he was penalized only fifteen cents per diem for five days.***

**(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)**



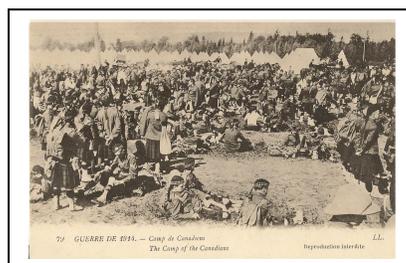
The 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry was a unit of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, of which there were eventually to be four on the *Western Front* during the *Great War*. However, neither the Brigade\* nor the Division was to officially come into being until the midnight of December 31, 1915 – January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916.

(Right: *The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the [canadiansoldiers.com](http://canadiansoldiers.com) web-site*)



*\*The other battalions of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade were the 49<sup>th</sup> (Edmonton Regiment), the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) and the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment).*

(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)



In the winter of 1915-1916 and into the spring and summer of 1916, the Battalion served in Belgium, at first just to the north of the Franco-Belgian frontier in co-operation with the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, and then, as of March and April, 1916, in the *Ypres Salient* where it was to be responsible for an area to the south-east.



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

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



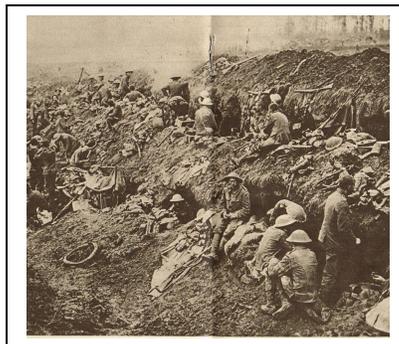
The first five months of Private Thistle's Battalion's service on the Continent had therefore comprised the day-by-day drudgery and dangers of the routines and rigours of trench warfare during the *Great War*\*.

*\*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.*

(continued)

*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.*

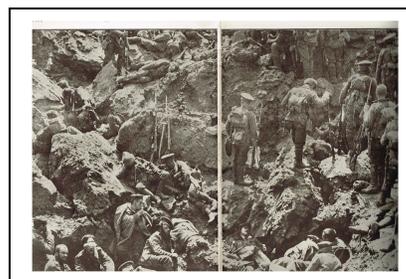
*(Right: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the year 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)*



Thus the winter of 1915-1916 was to pass, as were all the winters of the Great War, in lethargic manner. There was little infantry action – patrolling, wiring-parties and the occasional raid – but little else and casualties were usually due to the enemy’s artillery and his snipers.

Spring had arrived and with it the decision for a joint venture with British forces. But this was to be in a sector where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was serving, and it was the infantry of *this* formation which was involved, *not* of Private Thistle’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.

This *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* was to *officially* take place from March 27 up until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi\* was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was to be there that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they had detonated on that March 27, having then followed up with an infantry assault.

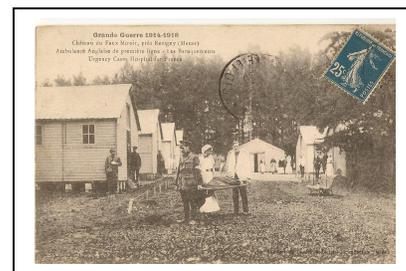


After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> of the month, when the battle had been called off, both sides were to be back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

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

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division affair and the personnel of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the artillery duels several kilometres away.

Days after the conclusion of this episode, Private Thistle was again in need of medical treatment, for influenza. Admitted on either the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of that April into the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance established at the time at Poperinghe he was forwarded on the 18<sup>th</sup> to the Divisional Rest Station operated by the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance. There he remained until released *to duty* with his unit four days later, on April 22.



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

The first major altercation in which the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and Private Thistle were to play a role was the confrontation between the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division – and other Canadian units - and the Kaiser’s Army, fought in June of 1916 at and about *Mount Sorrel*.

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *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, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians successfully patched up their defences.

The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, however, delivered piece-meal, poorly co-ordinated, and poorly supported by the artillery, was to prove a horrendous experience for the Canadians.



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

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



The 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, of which the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was a component, was to be in the thick of it all. Excerpts from its War Diary take up the story:

*2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> June – On the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> the enemy opened up a severe bombardment on our front, support and communicating trenches, commencing at 7.45 a.m. and keeping up an intense fire until noon when he launched an attack against our trenches. The artillery preparation had been so severe that he succeeded in penetrating our trenches and by evening of that day he was in possession of a good deal of our front and support trenches...*

*Counter attacks were made and succeeded in driving the enemy out of a portion of our trenches but owing to the difficulties of getting up reinforcements were unable to hold the ground recovered... The casualties suffered during the engagement were somewhat heavy in both officers and men...*

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



The 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion incurred a total of two-hundred seventy-eight casualties up until the night of June 5-6 when the entire 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade was withdrawn. Neither the Brigade nor the Battalion was to play any further part in the affair. On the night of June 12-13 the Canadians organized and then delivered what proved to be a final – and successful – counter-attack. After eleven days of fighting, the two sides had ended up for the most part where they had started.



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

Private Thistle's role in the battle was, however, to be a brief one – if at all. There is a single and difficult to decipher suggestion that he was wounded on June 1, a quiet day, and evacuated on that day to the 10<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at the Remy Siding, in close proximity to Poperinghe. If not, the incident must surely have occurred during the few days following.

Excerpt from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary report on the events of June 2 and 3, 1916, and particularly on the part played by Private Thistle's 'A' Company:

***On the morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> June the 42<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Battalion were acting as Brigade support for the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade frontage comprising HOOGE and SANCTUARY WOOD...***

***A heavy bombardment by the enemy of SANCTUARY WOOD frontage and frontage of 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade on out right continued all day.***

***At 2 p.m. orders were received to send one company to MAPLE COPSE to reinforce the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and one company to man ZILLEBEKE SWITCH. Our remaining two companies were despatched about one hour later to man the R. Line behind HOOGE and to effect a junction with the P.P.C.L.I. who were still holding support trenches in NORTH SANCTUARY WOOD Area...***

***... 'A' Company, on arrival at MAPLE COPSE, reported to Colonel Baker, 5<sup>th</sup> C.M.R., who instructed them to hold the North West corner of MAPLE COPSE. The company lined a trench at this point but shell fire forced them to draw back to ZILLEBEKE communication trench, about fifty yards distant. There they received a message from the P.P.C.L.I. saying they were cut off in SANCTUARY WOOD.***

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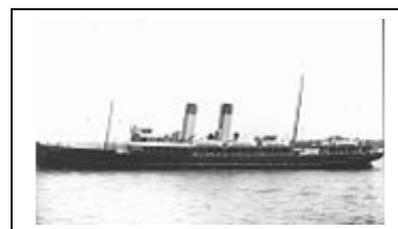
**Leaving one platoon in ZILLEBEKE Trench...the OC (Officer Commanding) Company moved his company up BORDER LANE connecting with the P.P.C.L.I. in LOVERS LANE... They held this point from about 6.30 p.m. until the following morning although subjected to very heavy shell and rifle fire.**

**On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> instant, Major Walker took the 3<sup>rd</sup> remainder of his three platoons – reduced to about thirty – back to join his platoon in support...**

**Private Thistle was next documented as having been admitted on June 5 into the 13<sup>th</sup> Stationary Hospital at Boulogne for medical attention to severe gun-shot wounds - perforating - to his right thigh.**

**It was then at Boulogne that a decision was taken that he be invalided for further treatment to the United Kingdom; thus on June 9 he was placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *St. Denis* for the short cross-Channel journey likely back through Folkestone. There for bureaucratic reasons he became the responsibility of the Canadian Casualties Assembly Centre – the office created to organize the care of the Canadian sick and wounded returning from the Continent – while, in practice, he was transported to the Royal Herbert Hospital at Woolwich on the River Thames in the south-east outskirts of London.**

**(Right: *His Majesty's Hospital Ship St. Denis*, seen here as a passenger ferry before donning in its war-time white with a red cross – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)**



**On June 19, Private Thistle was reported as seriously ill. As it often was to be in the days before the advent of anti-biotics, infection became a greater problem than the wound itself, and it would appear that such was the case of Private Thistle.**

**He was reported by the Royal Herbert Hospital authorities as having died of wounds on July 3, 1916, a final medical report reading as follows: *Had a severe hæmorrhage 2 days after admission, developed general septicæmia, streptococci found in blood, Died July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1916***

**A burial report suggests that he was at first laid in a common grave before being placed in a separate one on October 18 of 1919.**

**The son of Carl(?) Thistle, deceased by the time of enlistment, and of Annie (Maria(?)) – see further above) Thistle\*, of Britannia Cove(?)\*\* and she later of Montreal before Calgary, he was also brother to at least Annie-Clark Thistle.**

***\*To whom he had as of February 15 (period of first enlistment), 1915, allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay. As of May 1, 1915 (second enlistment), he then allotted fifteen dollars to either his mother or to a Miss Helen Reid whose address is recorded as having been the Canadian Patriotic Fund, Drummond Building, Montreal.***

***\*\*His father's name and the place of residence has been found in only the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records.***

**(continued)**

James Douglas Thistle had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen-years (first enlistment) and nineteen years and one month (second): date of birth at St. John's, Newfoundland (St. John's cited on a single paper), either April 5, 1896 or April 26, 1896 (from two attestation papers).

Private James Douglas Thistle was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 24, 2023.