

**Private Alfred William Turner (Number 23193) of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion (48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.**

**(Right: The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion wore a kilt of the Davidson tartan, the image of which is from the Collins Gem series of books.)**



**(continued)**

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *civil engineer*, Alfred William Turner has left little behind him a propos his early life in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, except that he had been a student at the Methodist College – later Prince of Wales College – as his name features among those from that institution who fell during the *Great War*.

All else that can apparently be said with any certainty is that he was present in or in the vicinity of *Camp Valcartier*, Québec, during the month of September, 1914, for that was when and where he enlisted. There appear to be no of his journey there.

According to a duplicate of his Medical History, Alfred William Turner enlisted on September 17 at Québec City and was *taken on strength* by the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment "*Royal Rifles*" of the Canadian Militia. On or about September 22 the Regiment was transported to *Camp Valcartier*, the complex still in the throes of being established, to the north of the Quebec capital where it metamorphosed into the 12<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion\*.

*\*The Canadian Militia was largely organized in or about the year 1871 when the fledgling Dominion of Canada was to take responsibility from British forces for its own defence. As its reason was purely defensive, Militia units were prohibited by law from undertaking operations outside the borders of the country. However, on the outbreak of war, they were not precluded from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions, and indeed Militia personnel were to comprise a majority of those recruits volunteering during the first months of the conflict.*

As for the medical examination in question, it had been undergone in Quebec City on September 8, and Alfred William Turner had been pronounced as...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*.

His first pay records show that it was on September 22 that Private Turner was to be first remunerated for his services to the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Overseas Battalion and that it was only a single day later, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, on which he was attested, his oath witnessed by an official of the Quebec Superior Court and by the Commanding Officer of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

It was to be the same Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harry Fulton MacLeod, who was to bring the formalities of Private Turner's enlistment to a conclusion five days later again, on September 28, when he declared – on pater – that...*A.W. Turner...having been final approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

After that, things began to happen fast as the first Canadian Contingent prepared for overseas service. Ships had been both requisitioned and chartered and on September 30, having made the short journey by train from Valcartier to the port of Quebec, the fifty-four officers and eleven-hundred fifty-nine *other ranks* of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Scotian*, the vessel having been requisitioned as a troopship.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *The SS Scotian shown here leaving Southampton en route to Bombay (today Mumbai): After her employment as a troop-ship in 1914, she was used to house German prisoners-of war.* – image from the *Historical RFA (Royal Fleet Auxiliary) web-site*)

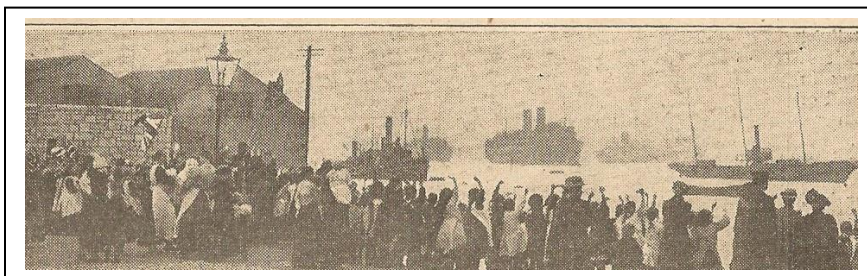
On the same September 30 a number of troop transports – some of them having spent days at anchor in Wolfe’s Cove, just upstream from Quebec City – had begun to slowly descend the St. Lawrence River to congregate on October 3 in the area of the Gaspé. From there on that night, the thirty-one passenger vessels and their five Royal Navy escorts began their journey in convoy across the Atlantic.

Whether Private Turner was aware of it - or not - is not documented but, on October 5, as the formation was passing along the south coast of Newfoundland, the small Bowring Brothers’ steamer *Florizel*, carrying the *First Five-Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment overseas, sailed to meet it and to join it,.

The convoy reached its destination, the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport, on October 14. However, such was the poor organization of the port at that time, that some troops were to remain on board their ship for several days before disembarkation. In fact, the convoy had been sailing for Southampton but a submarine scare had brought about a change in plans and Plymouth-Devonport, undergoing refitting and renovations, was to be used – *faute de mieux*.

Private Turner’s Battalion was not one of those to spend the longest amount of time in the harbour on board ship: however, seven days must have seemed more than long enough as the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to set foot on land until October 21, whereupon it was immediately transported by train from North Road Station, Plymouth, to the large military encampment on Salisbury Plain.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist has concluded his entry of that day, then opened his entry for the next by noting that the subsequent journey of the first train was not to start until...7.10 p.m....and the second at 8.30 p.m.



Both trains had arrived at Lavington Station by fifteen minutes before one in the morning but *Pond Farm Camp*, the *unit’s* destination, was yet two hours and some minutes’ march distant; and while the baggage was to travel by motor transport, the trek was to be undertaken on foot. *Pond Farm Camp* was reached at three in the morning of October 22 – and it had rained heavily all the way.

(Right above: *Some of the convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force shown at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914* – from *The War Illustrated*)

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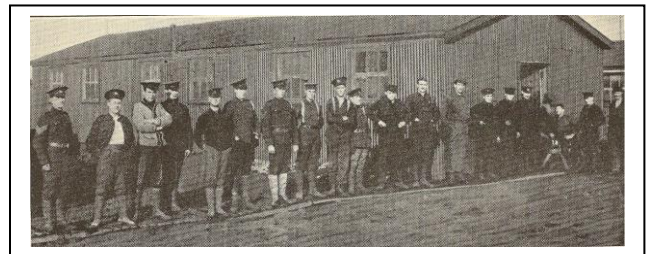
The Army Regulations of the day were such that troops were to undergo some fourteen weeks of training from the time of enlistment; at that point they were to be considered as being fit for *active service*. Thus life at *Pond Farm Camp* was to become replete with physical drills, musketry and route marches.

The newly-arrived Canadians were to spend the remainder of the month of October - and up until the first week of February, 1915 - in becoming proper *Soldiers of the King* – even if they were *colonials*. The King in question arrived to inspect his Canadian soldiers on the Salisbury Plain on November 4 – for a change it was a fine day.



(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – photograph from *Bain News Services* via *Wikipedia*)

On February 4 the Canadian Division\* marched to a review area where they were inspected by His Majesty King George V, and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener\*\*. The next few days were spent in final preparation for departure before, on February 8, the infantry battalions of the Division boarded trains at Amesbury to take it to the west-coast port of Avonmouth.



\*Often designated as such until the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division when, logically, it became the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.

\*\*For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener was named in 1916 – it had been called Berlin until then.

(Right above: *Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire* – from *The War Illustrated*)

However, neither the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion nor Private Turner was to cross from England to France: on January 17, 1915, the 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Battalions had been designated to form a reserve brigade and to remain behind in England to form the nucleus of a Canadian Training Depot. Soon also they were to move from the mud of the Salisbury Plain to the county of Kent.

There, overlooking the Dover Straits and in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone, the Canadians were establishing a large military complex: *Shorncliffe*. One of its subsidiary camps was to be in the area of *East Sandling* and, by the time of Private Turner's eventual departure for the Continent, it was to be there that the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion, now designated as the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion, had been stationed.



**(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*)**

According to his pay records it was in the Month of April, 1915, that he was attached to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion, already serving in Belgium by then\*. However, the same records do not provide us with the date on which he was physically transferred from *East Sandling* to the Continent. Nevertheless, it was likely on the night of April 3-4 of 1915 that this transpired as the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion Diary notes a draft of two-hundred fifty *other ranks* being despatched to the 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion\*\* – as well as other drafts sent elsewhere.

***\*These records in fact state that it was the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion which now became responsible for him, but this does not correspond to the remainder of his dossier which shows the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion to be the unit by which he was taken on strength.***

***\*\*Since the 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not even authorized to form in Canada until later that year this is surely a case of a number having been misread and 15 recorded as 75.***

Unfortunately, this simplifies the puzzle only somewhat since Private Turner's own records then show that he did not report *to duty* with his new unit until as late as May 3. Where he may have been in the meantime is unclear: in camp in the vicinity of Boulogne or near the industrial port-city of Le Havre perhaps, where the future Canadian Base Depot was being established? – neither of these, or any other pertinent information, has been recorded – or it may be that he was in fact in a later draft sent by the 12<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion whose War Diary from April of 1915 until April of 1917 does not appear to be available to confirm this.

Thus we are informed only – and that from an unidentified source – that on May 3 of 1915 he joined the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders of Canada*) *in the field* at a time when the unit was resting in billets in or near to the northern French town of Bailleul. The Battalion had only very recently fought in the *Second Battle of Ypres* (see further below) and was then re-organizing and re-enforcing: Private Turner and any other new arrivals were likely a welcome addition to its depleted ranks.

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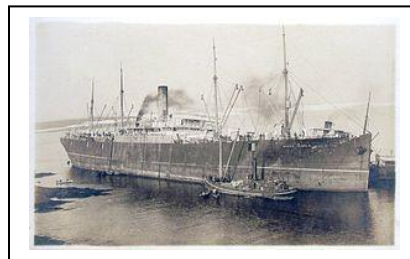
The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a component of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian Division\*. The Battalion – as with the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion - had been among the first to travel overseas from Canada, having sailed on His Majesty's Transport *Megantic* in early October of 1914. As already seen, the convoy carrying the Canadian Division had arrived at the English south-coast naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport on October 14; on the morrow, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had disembarked, whereupon the unit had been transported to that same large British military complex on the Salisbury Plain.



***\*Later, with the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, the formation was re-designated as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.***

**(Preceding page: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport almost a century after the Great War – and a lot less busy nowadays than back then - photograph from 2013*)**

The next seventeen weeks had been spent under canvas, much at the mercy of a rainy and snowy English winter, before the entire Canadian Division – with the exception, as has been seen, of four battalions, Private Turner's being one, and a few other non-infantry units - in the period of February 9 to 15, had crossed the English Channel from Avonport, Bristol, to the Breton port of St-Nazaire.



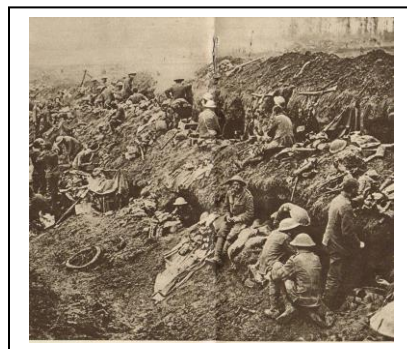
**(Right above: *His Majesty's Transport Mount Temple, requisitioned from the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company, here shown in 1907 having run aground off Nova Scotia, was the vessel on which the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion made the journey from Avonmouth to St-Nazaire in February of 1915. The photograph is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)**

From there the Canadians had been transported to the northern area of France where the Division was to assume responsibility for the *Fleurbaix Sector*. For the next two months this would prove to be a relatively quiet posting and would thus be a period which permitted all 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion personnel to become accustomed to the rigours, routines and perils of life in – and out of – the trenches\*.



**(Right above: *Troops on the march in the north of France during the early period of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)**

**\*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*)**

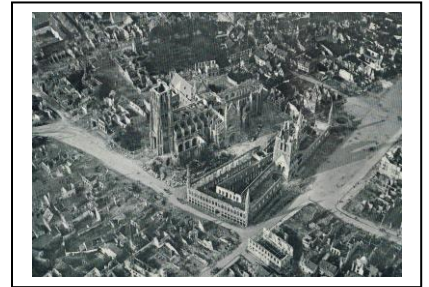
In April the Canadian Division was then to cross the Franco-Belgian frontier and to proceed to the ravaged medieval city of Ypres, there to take over a north-eastern sector from French troops. This was an area of the so-called *Ypres Salient* which was to prove to be one of the most lethal sectors of the *Great War*.

It was on April 15 that the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun its move, by the following evening having marched across the border to Abèle to board busses to Poperinghe from where, again on foot, it had marched the final twelve kilometres or so eastward to take up billets in the aforementioned remnants of Ypres. It was not until four days afterwards that the unit had taken over trenches, these in the area of Sint-Juliaan (*Saint Julien*), there having relieved the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion.



(Right above: *Busses requisitioned from the public transportation system in London being used by troops in Belgium – from Illustration*)

(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)



The Canadian Division had moved into the *Ypres Salient* just after mid-April. Some units were not even to be *in situ* when, only days later, the dam had broken - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, had threatened to sweep all before it. The date was April 22, 1915.



(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*)

The *2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the chlorine would prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine had proved overwhelming.



(Right above: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



(Right: *Entitled: Bombardement d’Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

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The cloud had been noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left had wavered and then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary to report a number of them passing in haste to the rear through the Canadian trenches...*many of them wounded. Enemy shelled trenches all night* (from 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary).

By the 23<sup>rd</sup> of the month the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions, heavily shelled in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan, had held firm at least partially until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when the enemy had again attacked the front lines at Sint-Juliaan, there to inflict heavy casualties. A further retirement had thereupon become necessary.

At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close they had been coming to a breakthrough, or else they had not possessed the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians and British forces had closed the gaps.

(Right below: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier or simply the St-Julien Memorial – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads in the vicinity of where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)

The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been relieved on the following day, April 25, and had been withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches closer to Ypres. The next day, April 26, was to be one of apparent confusion: the Battalion had retired at two o'clock in the morning to its Transport Lines just to the west of Ypres, before having been ordered forward just six hours later into reserve positions. Six hours later again, the unit had then been moved up to trenches at Wieltje, again just to the north-east of the city.



There the unit had been shelled continuously, although there was to be no subsequent enemy infantry advance before the Battalion once more, at half-past seven on the following morning, April 27, had been ordered to withdraw to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion Transport Lines in the vicinity of the village of Vlamertinghe.

It had then been the moment to take a casualty count: on that morning of April 27 the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist had noted...*Total Casualties for April 22<sup>nd</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>/15. Killed 1 Officer, 16 Other Ranks – Wounded 5 Officers, 19 Other Ranks – 11 Officers, 639 Other Ranks.*

Many of those six-hundred thirty-nine...*missing in action*...were to subsequently return to the unit, others would be reported by the administration of the various medical facilities, but all too many would be remembered eventually by only a name carved among the fifty-five thousand of the *Menin Gate* and the thirty-five thousand of the *Tyne Cot Memorial*.



(Right: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died 'missing' after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010)*



On April 28...*Battalion took up line of trenches north of St-Jean. (Entire 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for that day)*

*Enemy quiet. Battalion moved to take up new line of trenches at No. 4 Pontoon Bridge. (Entire 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 29)*

And for April 30...*Trenches shelled.*

(Right: *The Yser Canal in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after units of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade moved to man its western bank at the end of April, 1915 – west is to the left – photograph from 2014)*



During the first days of May, with the Battalion now back in support positions, there had been a series of alarms and the unit had been prepared to move forward once more.

However, these crises had dissipated and on May 4, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had marched the painfully-long twenty kilometres south-westward, away from *the Salient*, to billets in the area of the northern French town of Bailleul where it possibly was to be – from the little information given unto us – that Private Turner had reported *to duty* with his new unit.

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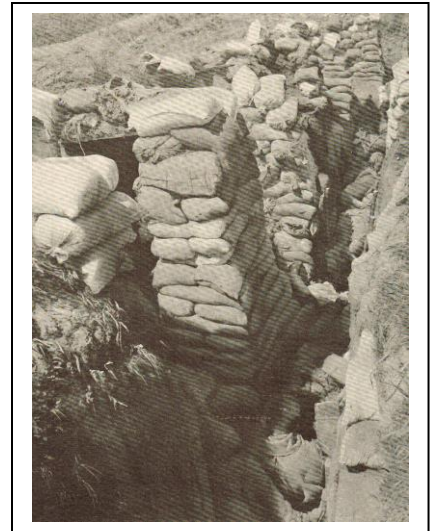
(Right: *The re-built town of Bailleul almost a century after the visit by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade: Much of the damage to be done to it would be the result of the later fighting in the spring of 1918. – photograph from 2010.)*



The unit remained in the area of Bailleul for ten days, at first resting but with route marches and inspections imposing more and more on the daily routine. On May 11 had come an order to be ready to march at short notice but it was a false alert and the Battalion remained *in situ* until May 14.

On that 14<sup>th</sup> day of May, 1915, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to move further down the line to the south, and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further to the south again and had asked for British support.

**(Right: A French photograph of some German trenches – complete with dead defenders and perhaps attackers - captured in the area south of Givenchy before it later became an area of British responsibility – from Illustration)**



There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks were to take place by which the British High Command would manage to win back some three kilometres of ground but would also contrive to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left after *Second Ypres* of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not fielding the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered heavy losses.

Private Turner's 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved into billets at Rubecq in the early evening of May 14 and remained there, resting, for two days and three nights, although under orders to be ready to move at a single hour's notice. At three in the morning of May 17...*Battalion paraded in full marching order & went into trenches at RICHBOURG (Richebourg).*

On May 18...*Battalion moved into 2<sup>nd</sup> line trenches...but by the next day had apparently moved again...in reserve trenches north of Festubert.*

Excerpt of 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for May 20, 1915: *Coys 2 & 4 attacked... On account of being too left, and the enemies' heavy machine gun and shell fire the Companies were compelled to retire and were unable to make much headway.*



*What were left of the 2 Companies connected on the left with the 16<sup>th</sup> Batt and on the right with the 8<sup>th</sup> Batt, 2 Bgde, and took up and held the new line...*

*150 casualties with 1 Officer K, 2 W.*

**(Right above: Number 63525, Private J.S. Kennedy, a Newfoundlander in Canadian uniform, lies in Guards Cemetery, Windy Corner, at Festubert. – photograph from 2015)**

The next day, May 21, was apparently quiet with the Battalion moving into first-line trenches. On the morrow, May 22, the unit was relieved and by nine in the evening had marched to – and taken up billets in - the village of Essars. It remained there for four days until May 26 when it marched to, and into, the trenches at Festubert. On May 31, having spent much of its time digging and being sporadically shelled by the German guns, the Battalion was relieved and went into billets at Oblighem.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7<sup>th</sup> (*Meerut*) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, were to fare hardly better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same primitive tactics - was likewise a failure but it was to be on an even larger scale; it would cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

*\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



The reprieve for the personnel of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Oblighem was to last until June 6, when it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert, to relieve the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the trenches. Just as quickly, it moved back into billets at Le Préal on the following day, June 7, there to be greeted with the news that they were to attack enemy positions on June 10.

*\*Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

After two days resting in billets and likely anticipating the imminent assault, it must have come as a welcome piece of news to most that the attack had been postponed: not only that, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was to be relieved by 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to take over billets in the community of Croix de Fer.

The Battalion was now to remain at Croix de Fer for the next twelve days. During six of those days it was under orders to be ready to move at one hour's notice but this order had latterly been rescinded\*. On June 22 Private Turner's unit was ordered forward to relieve the 11<sup>th</sup> battalion and to take over some reserve trenches. Only two days later, it returned to its billets at Croix de Fer.

*\*Also notable at this juncture is the report of a draft of eleven re-enforcements having arrived on June 15. The event in itself should not have been unusual, particularly given the unit's recent losses, but it is the first mention of re-enforcements that the author has noticed in all the pages penned by the War Diarist from the time of the Battalion's arrival on the Continent in February, four months earlier.*

Two days later again the Battalion was marching away from the battlefields of Festubert and Givenchy – and so was the remainder of the Canadian Division.

From Croix de Fer the Battalion then moved on successive days to billets in Berquin and Bailleul before turning eastward and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier. There it was to take up its new and more permanent quarters at a place called *Lampernisse Farm*.

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Having reached the area of Ploegsteert\* on July 5, there the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to remain – as was the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



*\*Ploegsteert is a community just to the north of the Franco-Belgian frontier.*

*(Right above: Farmland in the area of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014)*

July was a quiet month: the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained in the same general area training, playing sports, supplying working-parties – often for digging trench-lines – and undergoing inspection for a number of things by a similar number of different officers. On occasion the postings spent in reserve were further afield than usual, but the daily routine was much the same and there were – and still are - no large towns in the area where to spend the little, if any, free time available.

September was noteworthy for the arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division\* from England. It was thereupon stationed in an area adjacent and to the north of the *Ploegsteert Sector* and the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, in the *St. Eloi sub-Sector*.

There it was to remain for the best part of a year.

The two Canadian divisions now settled in for a long period of relative calm; there was to be no major concerted infantry activity until the spring of the next year although, of course, there was constant patrolling and intermittent raiding by both sides. The interminable flow of casualties was, for the most part during these *quieter times*, due to the opposition artillery and also to his snipers.

When infantry hostilities did eventually re-occur, it was to be the new-comers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division who would be embroiled in the first offensive action of 1916. The personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – and thus of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion - were to be occupied during much of that period by their transfer from the *Ploegsteert Sector* to the southern outskirts of Ypres\*. If anything untoward was noticed, it was only to be the crescendo of German artillery fire in the area of the village of St-Éloi.



*(Right above: German bunkers still in use in the area of St-Éloi, these days serving as cattle-sheds – photograph from 2016)*

*\*Thus the three Canadian Divisions were now to be fighting in three adjacent sectors, side by side\*.*

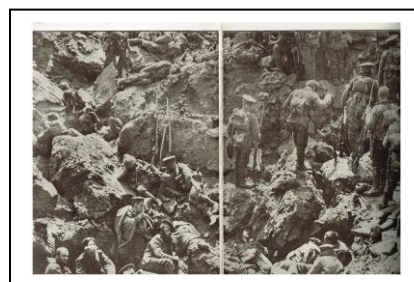
(continued)

***\*The Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had officially come into being at the mid-night of December 31, 1915, and of January 1 of 1916. However, unlike its two predecessors, the Division had been formed on the Continent, some of its units having already been on active service there for months. Others did not arrive until the early weeks of 1916, thus it was not until March of that year that the Division was to be capable of assuming responsibility for any sector. When it eventually was ready, it was thrust into the south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient where it was serving by the time that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division made its move.***

***Thus, by the end of April of 1916 the three Canadian Divisions were to be aligned, serving side by side by side.***

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

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



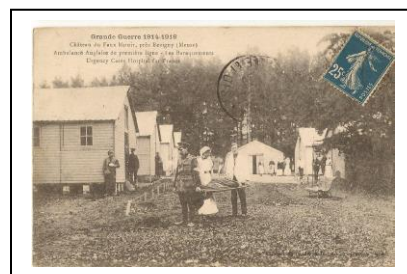
**Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.**

**The *Action of the St. Eloi Craters* had not been a happy experience for the novice Canadians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division.**

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

**In mid-April Private Turner reported sick. His records, alas, are more than a little convoluted and at times contradictory but the following may be as precise as is possible:**

**On April 19 he was sent to the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance at Reninghelst and diagnosed as having contracted influenza. From there he was likely forwarded to the 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional Rest Station perhaps run by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance in the area of Boeschepe. Now the records have become totally nonsensical, terminating with him as having returned *to duty* on April 26 but not having been discharged *to duty* from medical care until May 6.**



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

Six weeks following the episode at St-Éloi there was then to be the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*. This was to involve principally the troops of the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, but a number of other units from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions, the situation at times critical, would also subsequently play a role.

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 in a sector to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: *Mount Sorrel*.



(Right above: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, was to overrun 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 were allowed the time to re-organize their defences.



Sir Julien Byng's\* perhaps too hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, however, delivered piece-meal, poorly supported by artillery and badly co-ordinated, was to prove a costly experience for the Canadians.

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

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

Meanwhile, at the time of the onset of the German attack, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion's baseball team had been playing during that afternoon of June 2 but by two o'clock of the following morning it was *standing to* in the trenches near the village of Zillebeke. From there Private Turner's Battalion was ordered to move up during the early hours, then to take part in that counter-attack of June 3 due to begin at eight thirty-five.



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

Excerpts from the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of June 3, 1916: *...the Officers and men...rushed forward in the face...of Artillery and Machine-Gun fire. It did not seem possible that anything could live through it...and...the first line were all shot down. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> line came up and went right on...*

(continued)

***During the whole of this time the enemy maintained an intense Artillery and M.G. fire on our men...and it soon became apparent that the objective could not be reached. Accordingly our men fell back...***

**That night the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved and was not to go up to the forward area again until the evening of June 12. Present there in order to support the Canadian attack of the early morning, its services were apparently not to be called upon – and it was reported to have incurred...*no casualties.***



**There also appear to be no casualty figures available in the War Diary for that month – although there undoubtedly had been - but, while it was recuperating in the rear area, there had arrived two re-enforcement drafts totalling four-hundred twenty-five *other ranks* to replace the dead and incapacitated.**

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

**From the time of its withdrawal from the area of *Mount Sorrel* until the final week of August the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion had passed the early summer submitting to the everyday grind of life in the trenches. Often the war diaries of this period refer to *quiet days...front quieter than normal*: to be remembered of course, is that everything is relative.**



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

**The first part of the summer of 1916 was not to be a tumultuous time for the Canadians – now become the Canadian Corps; after the efforts at *Mount Sorrel* perhaps most personnel preferred it to be that way. Serving in close support near *Hill 60* for three days as of June 18, *normal* enemy artillery fire was the only activity reported by the War Diarist.**

**During the period from June 20 until August 11, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to spend sixteen days in the front-line trenches and a further six in support positions. The remainder of that time was passed working and training in areas to the rear such as *Connaught Lines, Scottish Lines, Victoria Camp* and *Swan Chateau*.**

**At the beginning of August the unit was sent at first into Divisional Reserve and, after that, into Corps Reserve. By that time, the first units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division were being expected from England. These would soon be filling at least a part of the void to be left by the troops of the now-departing 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.**

**(continued)**

Further to the south, at a place and in the ongoing British summer offensive – both known as *the Somme* – things were not going as well as the British High Command had optimistically anticipated. It had now been found necessary to call upon the forces of the Empire (*Commonwealth*) to play a role. To that end the Canadians were thus to begin to withdraw from Belgium to undergo training in northern France before then being ordered to the south to fight in the *First Battle of the Somme*.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was to be the first to depart.

On August 11 the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion began a two-day westward march from Belgium, through the French community of Steenvoorde then southwards to the newly-prepared *Second Army Training Area*. There now followed two weeks of: platoon drill, company drill, battalion drill, bayonet drill, bombing (*hand-grenade*) drill, gas-helmet (*mask*) drill, musketry, visual signalling...and the inevitable, almost-daily, route march.



(Right above: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph on a preceding page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles\**, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)

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

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

On August 27 the unit marched once more: to the railway station at the large centre of St-Omer. There it entrained for the journey to Conteville where it arrived at twenty minutes past eleven that evening, to be faced with a three-and-a-half hour march to its billets. The following day was, thankfully, devoted to rest.

(Right below: *Almost a century after the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion passed through it on the way to the First Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation.* – photograph from 2015)

Pernois on August 29, La Vicogne on the morrow, Vadencourt on the following day again: this was the route marched until, on September 1, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion reported to the large encampment of *Brickfields* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert – and to the German guns. The unit bivouacked at *Brickfields Camp* that night before marching off to billets in Albert itself on the next day.





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

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

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been comprised of troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

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

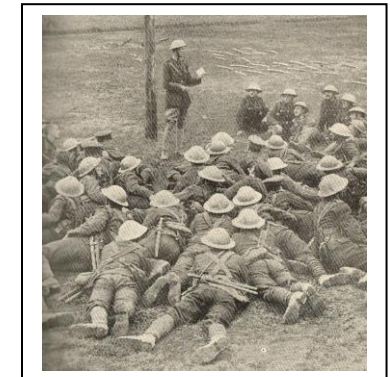
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), and then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23), before the Canadians had entered the fray on or about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

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

Having spent the night of September 2-3 in billets in Albert, the Battalion marched off to positions in the area of La Boisselle\* and Tara Hill where it would occupy support lines on the next day, September 4, before then moving up into the front lines for the following three.

*\*Today the village of La Boisselle is known for the huge crater which remains there a century after the detonation of the largest of the nineteen mines exploded just prior to the attack of July 1. At the time it was perhaps history's largest man-made explosion. The crater, now more than a hundred years old, is still impressive, even today.*

(continued)



(Preceding page: *The aforementioned Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – apparently the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?)*)

The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 5 of 1916 reads as follows: *Days passed with the continuous barrage of Enemy Artillery on our support and front lines. Most of his shells bursting well in rear of front line.*

*No material change in situation, Casualties light, during the morning. About noon the enemy increased his barrage, to which our artillery replied with good effect.*

*Night passed with the normal barrage fire. Enemy seemed to be on the alert and using great number of lights.*

The son of George Edward Turner, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Mines, and of Catherine (also found as *Kathleen* and *Katherine*) D. Turner (née *Morrison*)\* of the South Side, St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Bessie, Jack, Frank-Calder and to Donald-M..

*\*The couple married on September 8, 1887.*

Private Turner was at first reported as having been *killed in action on September 7, 1916*; soon afterwards his file was revised so as to read...*on September 5, 1916*...the date of the amendment apparently not documented.

He is also then reported as having been...*Buried south of Chalk Pit*. It is almost certain that either the location of the grave was lost or forgotten, or it was destroyed in later fighting of which there was to be plenty.

Alfred William Turner had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years: date of birth at St. John's, Newfoundland (from attestation papers and from Newfoundland Birth Register), March 23, 1892.

Private Alfred William Turner 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 23, 2023.