



Private Henry Ward Vatcher (Number 703292) of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Northern British Columbia\**), 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 image of the shoulder-patch of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion is from the Wikipedia web-site.)*

*\*After August of 1917 the unit was designated as the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (Central Ontario).*

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *sailor*, Henry Ward Vatcher may have been the eighteen-year old Ward Vatcher found on the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* for its crossing of the Cabot Strait of April 5, 1910, from Port aux Basques, Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney, Cape Breton, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The young man was on his way to Halifax.

However, while this may have been the Ward Vatcher of this short biography, this is not confirmed, and thus all that may be said with any certainty of *our* Henry Ward Vatcher, is

that he was resident in, or not far distant from, the community of Prince Rupert, British Columbia, in January of 1916, for that is where and when he enlisted.

His papers show that it was on the fifth day of that month that he presented himself in that community for a medical examination – a procedure which pronounced him as...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. On the following day he both enlisted and attested, at which time he was *taken on strength* by the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*Northern British Columbia*) - which was initially also designated the *Comox-Atlin* Battalion.

Almost two months after these initial processes, on March 3 the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by a Major Huntington on behalf of the officer commanding the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Warden, when he declared – on paper – that...*W Vatcher...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation* - but where this final closure took place is not clear (see\* and following paragraph).

*\*However, given that Private Vatcher was to allocate a part of his monthly pay and was also to bequeath his all to a young lady from Victoria, it might be suggested that at some point he was to have spent time in the capital city of the province.*

By this time, although the Battalion Headquarters and most of the administrative offices were to be found in the capital city of Victoria, the training camp, such as it was, was being established on Goose Spit, Comox, on the north-eastern side of Vancouver Island.

Apparently there was little available at the site and not much more was to be forthcoming: the recruits were cold and hungry despite the best efforts of the quarter-masters and their staffs. Equipment proved to be lacking, almost as scarce as water – this latter problem almost provoking a change in the camp's location. For the new recruits it was not to be a happy experience although it would seem that not many complained.

On Saturday, June 10\*, the personnel of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at Comox embarked onto the SS *Princess Charlotte* for the journey down the straits to Vancouver. At ten o'clock on that same evening a crowd gathered at the railway station in the city to bid farewell to the unit and, at mid-night, the two trains which were to carry the Battalion over the breadth of the country, began their eight-day journey.



*\*Apparently, Private Vatcher had been Absent Without Leave the day before, June 9, for which misdemeanour he had forfeited one day's pay.*

(Preceding page: *The Princess Charlotte carrying the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (Northern British Columbia) pulls away from the dock at Comox.* – from *The Story of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion from BC to Baisieux* by Sgt Leonard McLeod Gould, HQ, 102nd Canadians WW1: the photograph donated by Rob Piggott)

On June 18 the two-train convoy reached the east-coast port of Halifax. On the way the Battalion had stopped twice per day for exercise – often in the guise of a march through the local community – and in Ottawa had paraded in front of HRH the Duke of Connaught,

at the time Governor-General of Canada, and the Canadian Minister of Militia, General Sir Sam Hughes, before proceeding on its way eastwards.

Once in Halifax the Battalion embarked on June 18, 1916, onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain*. Private Vatcher's unit was not to travel alone: also taking passage on the *Empress* were the 65<sup>th</sup>, the 84<sup>th</sup> and the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> Draft of the Canadian Field Artillery Depot, 67<sup>th</sup> Battery. The vessel sailed on June 20, carrying some four-thousand military passengers overseas to the United Kingdom.

The voyage was to be a poor one: A history of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion documents that...*there was literally not sufficient accommodation for all below and that, if the weather had been bad, so that men could not have slept on deck, there would have been no place for them to have slept at all.*

As for the food, it apparently was...*atrocious. ...every article of food was permeated with some disgusting preservative which caused all dishes to taste alike, all being equally objectionable.*

The *Empress* arrived in front of the port of Liverpool on June 28. However, she then remained anchored in the River Mersey before the troops disembarked on the morrow morn, to wait until that afternoon to board a train for *Camp Borden* in the county of Wiltshire. Within days Private Vatcher's 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had become designated as one of the four such units (battalions) of the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade which, in its turn, was to be one of the three brigades commanded by the newly-forming 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division.

Some six weeks of intensive training was now to follow during which period - the date not having been recorded in Private Vatcher's file - the Battalion was transferred to the not-distant *Camp Bramshott* in the neighbouring county of Hampshire. On or about August 11 the unit was transported from there to the English south-coast port of Southampton from where it sailed on board HMT *Connaught* to the Continent and to *active service*.



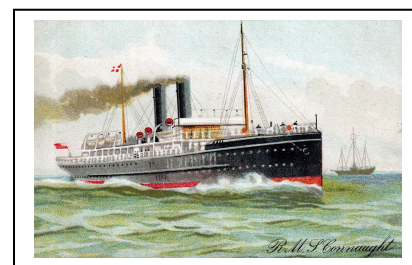
(Right above: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division was the last such formation to arrive to serve on the Continent, and it landed in its entirety in France in mid-August of 1916.

The 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion itself disembarked at Le Havre on August 12, to be immediately ordered north into the *Kingdom of Belgium* and to that part of the forward area southward of Ypres, and towards that part of the *Western Front* just before which it traversed the Franco-Belgian frontier.



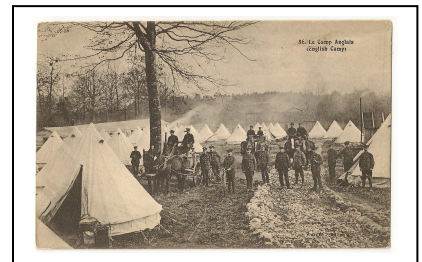
(Preceding page: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



(Right: *The image of the Royal Mail Ship Connaught, on which the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion traversed the English Channel en route to active service, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. Connaught, only months later returning from Le Havre to Southampton on March 3, 1917, was torpedoed and sunk.*)

By August 15, 1916, the unit had for the first time taken its place in the forward area of the front in Belgium, near to St-Éloi and by the twenty-first day of the month had already incurred its first thirty-one casualties, of which six had been fatalities.

The Battalion was to remain in the *St-Eloi sub-Sector* until October 17 when it withdrew to a *tented camp*. The 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion - with the entire 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, and following the lead of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisions - was about to migrate southwards into France, there to play a role in the ongoing British offensive of that summer and autumn of 1916, at *the Somme*.



(Right above: *A typical British Army Camp during a winter period somewhere in France – from a vintage post-card*)

In the meantime the Canadian units departing from Belgium were being replaced by troops from the British Isles – as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment – who had recently been fighting at *the Somme*; after what these battalions had just experienced, the *Ypres Salient* may well have seemed a bit like a holiday.

Yet there were still to be difficult moments: On the night of September 6-7 the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had been relieved after a tour in the forward area and had withdrawn to *MicMac Camp*. Among its duties there had been to provide working-parties, one of which, provided by Number 2 Company, had proceeded to...*Scottish Wood where unfortunately they suffered severely, a H.E. shell wrecked a dugout & men were killed and wounded...* (Excerpt from 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 8, 1916)

In fact, eight men had been killed outright by the explosion and a further nine had been wounded of whom two were later to be reported as having succumbed to their wounds\*. *The Salient* was still a lethal place.

From *MicMac Camp*, which the Battalion left on September 18, it was on foot - a three-day march via Hazebrouck and Arques - that the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was transferred to the vicinity of the northern French community of Tournehem-sur-la-Hem.

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There for the next eleven days the unit was to undergo intensive training and a great deal of marching, the War Diarist having commented... *the men getting into good shape*.

While getting into good shape, Private Vatcher was also getting into trouble: his Active Service Form records that on...25/9/16 – *Sentenced to 7 days F.P. # 1 for conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, in that he used profane language and*

**refused to obey the order from an N.C.O. He also lost his single dollar-a-day pay plus his daily ten cents per diem field allowance. It totalled seven dollars and seventy cents.**

**(Right below: 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 the 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.**

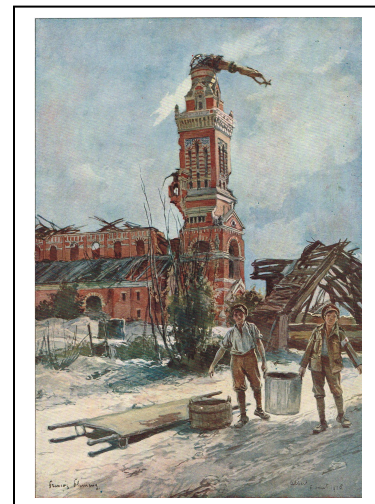


**By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.**

**The Battalion entrained on October 3 for the provincial town of Doullens some one-hundred twenty kilometres to the south in the French *Département* of the Somme. There it arrived at five o'clock on the following morning, still with a march of several kilometres to go to its billets in Gezaincourt.**

**A further week travelling on foot towards the sound of the guns saw the unit arrive at *Tara Hill Camp*, on October 11, in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert and well within range of the German artillery.**

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



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

**(continued)**

**On the first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being 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 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.**

**However, 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), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on 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 Courcelette, on September 15, almost a full month before the arrival of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to the same area.

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

After its arrival on October 11, during those first days serving at *the Somme*, the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion remained at *Tara Hill Camp* where... *Organization work and preparations for attack were carried on in accordance with Bde. O.O. 15 (Brigade Operational Order 15) (Excerpt from 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diary).*

After a week, on October 18, the unit was sent into the forward trenches; then, perhaps a little curiously, three of the four Companies were withdrawn on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, to return later on that same day. The fourth Company, upon the return of the others, withdrew in its turn. Thus, on the *next day*, October 21, it was to be 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies which attacked the German positions of the *Regina Trench* system.

Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry October 21, 1916: *At 12.06 pm "C" and "B" Companies forming the first wave and "D" Company the third & fourth, the Battalion took Regina Trench, with practically no opposition. A number of prisoners, both wounded and unwounded, were captured. Our casualties in attack numbered about 20 killed and 70 wounded... The three Companies consolidated their position and put out advanced posts, being heavily shelled during the night...*



(Right above: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it, finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

*Regina Trench* on this occasion would be re-captured by a German counter-attack, and it was not to be until November 10-11 of that year that the position was definitively taken and held by Canadian troops. In fact, the operation of November 10-11 was to be the next offensive infantry action in which the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to be involved - at a cost of ten *killed in action*, thirty-eight reported as *wounded*, and eight *missing in action*.

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Meanwhile, for the day after the attack of October 21, the 102<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion War Diary entry for October 22, 1916, reads as follows: *Situation Normal; heavy shelling during the day. Weather fine by day and frosty by night. "A" Company returned to front line to relieve "B" & "D" Companies, the latter proceeding to Cliff Trench. Casualties – 5 killed, 15 wounded.*

The son of Stephen Henry Vatcher, fisherman – deceased December 24, 1908 – and of Elizabeth Ann (or *Mary*) Vatcher (née *Ayre* or *Hare*)\* - deceased February 24, 1910 – of Burgeo, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Maud-Ellen (later married *Wright* in

Halifax), to Stephen Robert (lived in Halifax by the time of his brother's enlistment), to Bessie, and to Cora L. (later married *Skinner* and lived in St. Jacques).

*\*Two habitually reliable sources, Vital Statistics and cemetery headstones, here appear to disagree.*

To his friend, Miss Florence M. Billard of 2364, Thompson Avenue, Willows Beach, Victoria, British Columbia, as of July 1, 1916, he had allotted the monthly sum of fifteen dollars from his pay and, in a Will dated August 3, 1916, had bequeathed his all.

She was also to receive his medals.

Private Vatcher was at first reported as *missing in action believed killed* - until this was amended on November 15, 1916, so as to read *killed in action*, during the fighting near *Regina Trench, Somme*.

According to a government burial report, a Memorial Cross was erected in Albert Communal Cemetery (Extension) but apparently there was no marked grave – even though the row seems to be noted: D or O. But there appear to be no further details: logically, since he is commemorated on *Vimy Ridge*, there *is* no known grave.



(Right: *Albert Communal Cemetery Extension is the last resting-place of eight-hundred eighty-nine dead of two World Wars of whom twenty remain unidentified.* – photograph from 2015)

Henry Ward Vatcher had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-three years and six months: date of birth at Burgeo, Newfoundland, July 20, 1893 (from attestation papers); however, the original Newfoundland Birth Register shows the year to have been 1891.

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