

Private George Vey (Number 420691) of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish), 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 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish) of the C.E.F. is from the Wikipedia website*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a plumber, George Vey appears to have left behind no history of his early years in the Dominion of Newfoundland*, nor of his movement from there to Canada. All that may be said with certainty is that he was in the province of Manitoba during the first month of the year 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

****Except to say that he is recorded on his Attestation Papers as having served in the para-military Newfoundland Highlanders – although he is absent from the unit's Roll of Honour.***

According to his first pay records, January 5 was the day on which Private Vey began to be remunerated for his services to the 43rd Canadian Overseas Battalion (*Cameron Highlanders of Canada*). Also on that day, in the city of Winnipeg, George Vey underwent a medical examination which pronounced him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force.*

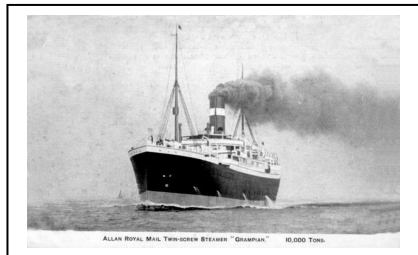
Attestation was undergone on that same date again, his oath witnessed by the Commanding Officer of the 43rd Battalion by which unit he had been *taken on strength.*

The formalities of enlistment were then brought to a conclusion when the same officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert MacDonnell Thomson, declared, on paper, that...*George Vey...Having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

January 5 of 1915 had been a busy day for Private Vey.

The 43rd Battalion (*Cameron Highlanders of Canada*) had been authorized to form in only December, 1914, the month preceding George Vey's enlistment, and it was to recruit mainly from the area of Winnipeg. The new Minto Armoury in the west end of the city was opened at or about this time, thus it was possibly there that Private Vey was now to train until the Battalion was ordered overseas. He had less than five months to wait.

It was to be on May 29 of that spring of 1915 that the thirty-nine officers and one-thousand twenty *other ranks* of the 43rd Battalion boarded a train in Winnipeg for the journey across a third of the continent to the city and harbour of Montréal. There on June 1, Private Vey's unit boarded His Majesty's Transport *Grampian*, a requisitioned ocean-liner of the *Allan Line*, for the Atlantic crossing.



(Right above: *The image of Grampian is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The 43rd Battalion was not to travel alone: also taking passage on the vessel to the United Kingdom were First Re-enforcement Drafts for the 44th and 45th Canadian Infantry Battalions.

Grampian sailed later on that same June 1 and some eight days later docked in the English naval facility at Devonport. From there the Battalion was transported – perhaps on the morrow - by train across the country to the Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, established by that time in the county of Kent and in the vicinity of the harbour and sea-side town of Folkestone.

The 43rd Battalion was now to once more train and to once more await the call for *overseas service*, although on this occasion the sea would be the English Channel and the service would be *active* and on the *Western Front.*



(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)

Like many other Canadian Infantry Battalions which were to disembark in the United Kingdom during the Great War, its personnel was used to re-enforce other Canadian units already serving on the Continent. But unlike these other battalions, the 43rd was eventually, in February of the following year, to cross the Channel to serve in the 3rd Canadian Division which, in 1915, was still in the process of being organized*.

****Before the end of the Great War, Canada would have despatched overseas more than two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were to be 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.

Thus it was that Private Vey’s unit would be ordered to provide two re-enforcement drafts for the 16th Battalion of the 1st Canadian Division, and Private Vey himself was to be a soldier in one of these detachments. In the meantime, however, while still at *Shorncliffe*, he was making his presence known to the unit’s authorities.

On two occasions he was apprehended for drunkenness: for the first misdemeanor on July 5 he was awarded ten days of Field Punishment #2; for the second such offence, on August 18, he was fined the sum of two dollars – two days’ pay.

Private Vey and his draft were to travel to France on the night of October 12-13, 1915, likely via nearby Folkestone and the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite. Whichever was the route that was taken, he reported to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles – in close proximity to the industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine – on that second date. Three days after his arrival, having in the meantime been *taken on strength* by the 16th Battalion (*Canadian Scottish*), on October 16 he was forwarded to his new unit,



(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: A photograph of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

At this time the 16th Battalion was serving with the 1st Canadian Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, Belgium, in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier. The Battalion War Diarist,



however, has made no mention of any re-enforcements having arrived *to duty* during this period - possibly because the unit's fighting companies were at the time serving a tour in the forward trenches, whereas Private Vey's Draft would likely have reported to the Headquarters or Transport positions behind the lines.

Private Vey was now on *active service*.

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

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The 16th Battalion had embarked at Avonmouth on February 11, 1915, and had crossed from England to the port of St-Nazaire, Brittany, from there to be transported by train towards the north. By February 17 the 16th Battalion had reached the northern French town of Armentières on the Franco-Belgian frontier where it was to spend a week. During the month which was to follow, the unit had then served in and about the *Laventie Sector* just to the south of Armentières.

Then, on the morning of April 16, after having spent several days in the area of Cassel, the unit had crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier.

It had been transported by bus into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, travelling from Steenvoorde on French territory to the village of Vlamertinghe just to the west of the Belgian city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).



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

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



By late in the day of the 16th, the 16th Battalion, having skirted on foot the ruins of Ypres to the west and north, had occupied trenches in the area of St-Julien (*Sint-Juliaan*), there having relieved French troops of the 79th Infantry Regiment.

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(Right below: *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*)

Even the first units of the Canadian Division to arrive there had been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for only a short space of time. During these few days of Canadian tenure *the Salient*



would prove to be relatively quiet, with little more than the constant enemy artillery to worry about. But then the dam had burst - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, was to threaten to sweep all before it.

The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after Second Ypres - which shows the shell of the by-then almost-abandoned medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was to be little left standing. – from Illustration)

The *Second Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. This was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the chlorine was to 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: 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 Illustration or Le Miroir)



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, then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered.

Thus a retreat, not always very cohesive, had become necessary while, at the same time, the 10th Battalion, closely supported by the 16th Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Brigade had been ordered to move forward to attack the enemy late that night; this had been done but at no small cost to the attackers.

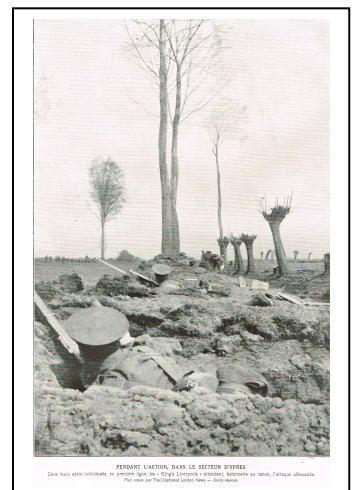


(Right above: Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration)

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By the second day, April 23, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan had held fast until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement was to become necessary.

At times there were to be breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close to a breakthrough they had come, or else they had not had the means of exploiting the situation.



And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.

April 25th had been spent in trenches sheltering from extremely heavy German shell-fire before the unit had been ordered to retire to the area of La Brique during that night of the 25th-26th. By now reduced to thirteen officers and some five-hundred *other ranks*, the Battalion had crossed the *Yser Canal* near La Brique; there, on the west bank of the waterway, the unit had dug in, only hours later to be ordered to the vicinity of St-Jean (*Sint-Jaan*), there to dig in once more under – once more - heavy enemy artillery fire.

(Right: *Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

Some forty-eight hours later, on April 28, the 16th Battalion was to be back in positions on the west bank of the *Yser Canal* having relieved the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion; then on the 29th it would be ordered back to the east bank, to construct a *proper defensive trench*. Having done that, on April 30 the unit had supported a French attack.

By this time, perhaps unsurprisingly, the 16th Battalion War Diarist was to enter in his journal: *Troops very tired and need reorganization.*

(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion moved into defensive positions on its western bank – west is to the left – photograph from 2014*)



Yet more enemy heavy artillery fire had been incurred during the first day of May although the resulting casualties appear to have been relatively light. But a relief promised for that night had failed to materialize and the Battalion was therefore to remain *in situ* on the east bank of the *Yser Canal*. The relief had eventually arrived somewhat overdue at half-past two in the morning of May 4 and the unit had then been retired to the area of Vlamertinghe.

Its trials had now been almost over...but not quite. At eight o'clock that same evening the 16th Battalion had been withdrawn from the *Second Battle of Ypres* – to the northern French communities of Bailleul and La Maison Blanche, some twenty-five kilometres distant. After an almost seven-hour march, it had reached its billets...at a quarter to three the following morning.

(Right: *The re-built town of Bailleul almost a century after the visit there of the 3rd 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.*)

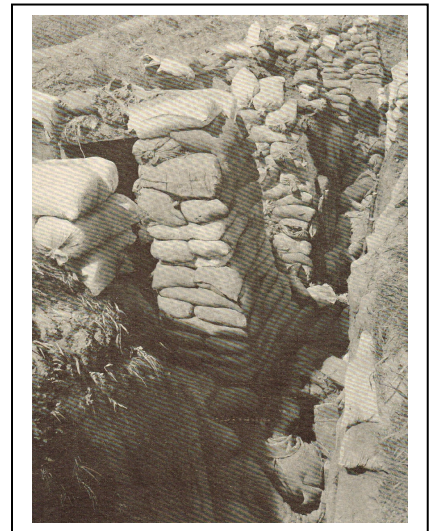
(Right: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted*



by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010)

On May 14 the 3rd Battalion had next been ordered to move down the line to the south, further into France to the areas of Festubert and Givenchy, and to take up billets at Quentin. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further 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 was to become an area of British responsibility. – from Illustration)



There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks had taken place in which the British High Command was to manage to gain three kilometres of ground but also to contrive to destroy, by the use of the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what had been left of the British pre-War professional Army after *Second Ypres*.

The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not able to field the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It would nonetheless suffer heavily.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert – had then fared hardly any better than had the British, each contingent – a Division – was to have incurred over two-thousand casualties before the offensive had drawn to a close.

The French effort further south – using the same tactics - had likewise been a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to 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.*

(Preceding page: 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(?))

An attack on May 18 - only partially effected - was not to be a great success but it had been followed on the morrow by an assault on positions known collectively as *The Orchard*, although it had been called off later that same day. The operation had continued on May 20 in rather disorganized fashion, successful in places, less so in others. From that day onward, however, the final week of that month appears to have comprised little or no infantry action conducted by the 16th Battalion.

On the first day of June the Battalion had been relieved from its posting at Festubert and had moved into billets at Oblinghem; in a few days' time, on June 6, it was to be ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far-distant to the south of Festubert. Posted into the forward trenches on occasion during that month to support British efforts – and with the same results, although less numerous, from repeating the same mistakes – on or about June 24 the entire Canadian Division had been retiring from the area.

**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.*

During this tour at Givenchy there was to be a change made to the Battalion weaponry when the Canadian-made rifles had been withdrawn from service in exchange for British standard-pattern weapons issued in their place. Eventually all the Canadian units were to be using the Lee-Enfield rifles although it would take almost a year for this to happen*.

**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 1915 the Canadian units were beginning to exchange 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 June 26, as a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the twenty-six officers and six-hundred sixty *other ranks* of the 16th Battalion had marched to billets in or near to the community of Neuf Berquin, on the following day having continued the retirement as far as La Maison Blanche from which the unit had marched towards Festubert some six weeks earlier. It was to remain there for the following eight days.

From there on July 5 a march of three and a half hours had seen the Battalion move eastwards into Belgium, to *the Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

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Having reached the area of the village of Ploegsteert, there the 16th Battalion had remained – as had the entire Canadian Division. In the months that had followed it would come 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 Battalion War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



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

The 16th Battalion, once having arrived back in Belgium and in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, had found itself posted to the picturesquely-named area of *the Piggeries* and the nearby trenches. At that particular moment the *Sector* had been reportedly – by the Battalion War Diarist – quiet, although this had not precluded casualties, among them fatalities.

And it was into this posting that, some three months after the arrival of the 16th Battalion in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, that Private Vey and his re-enforcement draft had marched on or about October 16 of 1915.

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It was now to be a full eleven months from the time of its retirement from Givenchy at the end of June, 1915, before the 16th Battalion was to be involved in a further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers ensured a constant flow of casualties. But by far the greatest part of that period, however, was to be spent submitting to the routines, to the rigours and to the perils of that daily grind in the trenches*.

**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.

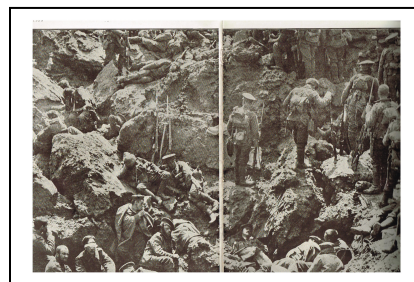
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(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

In the meantime, in Mid-September, the 2nd Canadian Division had disembarked at Boulogne from England and had been posted to the St. Éloi Sub-sector – also in Belgium – just to the north of the area held by the 1st Canadian Division. The newcomers also were now to experience several months of almost-passive trench warfare: it was not to be until the spring of 1916 that the formation would undertake its first major infantry operation.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 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 here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27.

After a brief initial success the attack 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 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were 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 – perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2nd Canadian Division affair and Private Vey and the other personnel of the 16th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery – and some heavy shelling from time to time, as the Battalion’s War Diary also reports.

During the month of May, on the 12th, his personal *Active Service Form* records that Private Vey...*Forfeits 10 days pay for Absent from Tatoo 6-5-16 to 8.45 pm...and...Forfeits 2 days pay by RW*. The fact that this occurred while he was on *active service* rendered it a serious charge – but the significance of RW remains unclear.

The next large-scale infantry confrontation to be contested between the Canadian forces and the German Army came about in the south-eastern area of the *Ypres Salient* where the Canadian 3rd Division had been posted. The situation, however, rapidly became serious enough that units other than those of the 3rd Division were soon ordered into the fray.

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under 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*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.



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(Preceding page: *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 were to re-organize their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly coordinated, was to prove a costly experience for the Canadians.



(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*)



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



On June 2 the 16th Battalion had been stationed behind the line to the south-west of Ypres but by the following morning it and the other three battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade – by then attached to the 3rd Canadian Division – had marched to the area of Railway Dugouts and then advanced further in the direction of *Maple Copse* and *Hill 60*. Ordered to prepare to counter-attack – later countermanded – the unit then began to consolidate existing defensive positions and to excavate new ones.

On June 6 the Germans made a further attack and the 16th Battalion was made ready once more to counter-attack if the Germans managed to take *Hill 60*. In the event they did not, and on the night of June 7-8 the unit was relieved.

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

Then on the night of June 11-12 the Battalion – in fact the entire 3rd Brigade – moved up again, the 16th Battalion to the area of Zillebeke from which it had been relieved only days before. During the remainder of June 12 it moved forward again until just after mid-night it was reported to be in its assembly trenches.

The final attack of the *Mount Sorrel* operation, preceded by a heavy barrage courtesy of a re-organized Canadian artillery, went in as early as one-thirty in the morning of that June 13. At eight minutes past three, some ninety minutes later, Private Vey's 16th Battalion was able to report that its objectives had been taken and that it was already beginning to extend and consolidate them.

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The unit remained in place for the following twenty-three hours and then was relieved by the 10th Canadian Battalion. For the 16th Battalion the affair at *Mount Sorrel* was over – at a price: the attack of June 13 had resulted in a casualty list of two-hundred fifty-seven killed and wounded.

(Right: *A century later, reminders of a violent past in close proximity to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature: In the first week of June of 1917, a British mine was detonated under its summit,*



thus removing much of its resemblance to a hill. – photograph from 2014)

For the two months which succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity being again limited to raids and patrols. However, this did not preclude a lengthy casualty list at times, for the most part due to artillery-fire and snipers.

During the month of August and September the Canadian Battalions were to be gradually withdrawn from the *Ypres Salient* and ordered to camps for training in what was termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 16th Battalion had been one of the first to retire, leaving the forward area for Brigade Support during the night of August 7-8. There were then to be a further five days of motorized transport and of marching.

On August 13 the unit reached the northern French community of Watten in the area of which training areas had been prepared. The British summer offensive in France was not proceeding as had been planned and depleted units of exhausted troops were by now being sent north into Belgium*. Their place was, at least partially, to be taken by the Canadians now in training.

**The 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment of the British 29th Division was one of those. It was stationed in Ypres itself from early August until October 8 when it was ordered to return to the Somme.*

*(Right: 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*)*



Now, during the time of this transfer, his personal *Active Service Form* records that Private Vey had been charged with inappropriate behaviour. However, if the recorded date, August 14, is correct, then the offences must have occurred in the French community of Watten rather than in the Belgian town of Poperinghe: *Sentenced to 7 days FP (Field Punishment) No 1 for 1) Absent from his billet in Poperinghe without a pass at 8.40 pm – 2) Improperly dressed and using obscene and insulting language to an NCO*

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Two weeks later, having trained – and also having played a number of baseball and football games – in the Watten area, on the night of August 27-28, the 16th Battalion moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer. The unit entrained there at one o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres, where it arrived some eight hours afterwards, at nine o'clock in the morning.

From there it was a further four days – all of it on foot – stopping each night in fresh billets, some of which the 16th Battalion War Diarist has described in his entries as... *Best billets for ages.*

(Right: *Almost a century after the 16th 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*)



Their trek terminated at bivouacs in *Brickfields Camp* in close vicinity to the provincial town of Albert on September 1, before the unit was ordered into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(Right: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?)*)



**La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

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 would cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.



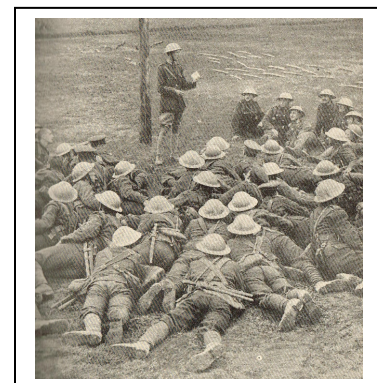
(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands by the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been 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 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which had lost so heavily on that day at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

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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), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on and about August 30 to be part of a third general offensive. Their first collective major action was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette on September 15.

(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**)



But by that time Private Vey's 16th Battalion had been in the front line for some ten days, having been sent in to relieve an Australian battalion. This first experience of *the Somme* was to last less than three days but the War Diarist had by then already recorded that... *Companies in front line suffered severely...* likely due to the very heavy shelling also recorded.

That heavy shelling on the night of September 4-5, on a personal level had resulted in contusions (bad bruising) to Private Vey's back and he was thereupon evacuated to the 49th Casualty Clearing Station at Contay for treatment. On that night he was placed on board the 8th Ambulance Train and forwarded to the 18th General Hospital at Camiers where, as of September 6, he was then afforded further medical care.



(Right above: *The railway station at Dannes-Camiers through which thousands of sick, wounded and convalescent military personnel passed during the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Five days later he was released from hospital and posted to Base Details, likely at *Rouelles Camp*, Le Havre, before being despatched back to his unit on September 17. It was then apparently to be a further four days before he was recorded as...*returned to unit.*

The unit in the meantime had not been involved in the aforementioned general offensive of September 15. Having been withdrawn well behind the lines on September 7, on *that* date it had been in the process of making its way back to billets in Albert where it arrived on the 18th. And there it remained for another six days by which time Private Vey had been discharged back to his Battalion.



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

(continued)

On September 24, the 16th Battalion received orders to supply troops for mopping-up parties in the course of an attack by the 13th and 15th Battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

The attack went in on the 26th and the action concluded on the night of September 27-28. *On counting casualties found that we had 116 casualties of whom 17 were killed* (Excerpt from 16th Battalion War Diary).

A final assault by the Battalion was now to be undertaken on October 8 in conjunction with the Canadian 13th and 3rd Battalions against the German positions known as *Regina*



Trench. At first at best only partially successful, German counter-attacks drove the Canadians back in the centre, obliging the troops on the two flanks to withdraw.

(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the First Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)



(Right: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

The 16th Battalion War Diary entry of October 8 records: *4.50 am – Barrage started – and attack followed – we gained our objective in spite of wire on our left. The Battalion on our right also succeeded – The Battalion on our left did not succeed.*

Reports received that all officers were killed or wounded except two.

The enemy made strong counter attack and drove the battalion back on our right leaving both our flanks in the air.

We finally had to retire to our kicking off trench.

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary reported the following casualties incurred by the 16th Battalion for that day: *Estimated 300 O.R. 2 officers killed, 1 officer died of wounds, 7 officers wounded, 3 officers missing.*



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

The son of Mrs Annie Vey of 10, Atlantic Avenue, St. John's, Newfoundland, to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay and to whom he had willed half of all he possessed*, he may have been brother to Samuel**.

**The other half was bequeathed to a Mrs Mary Donaldson of 334 Ross Avenue, Winnipeg.*

***This Samuel Vey was resident in 1913 at Number 10, Atlantic Avenue, St. John's, the given address of Mrs Annie Vey – she recorded also at times as Mrs Mary Vey. Samuel was an employee of James Vey, a well-known local photographer residing on LeMarchant Road at the time. Unfortunately the trail appears to end here and the connections to George Vey peter out...*

Private Vey was reported as having been *killed in action* during the fighting of October 8, 1916; a further report states simply that...*Body not recovered for burial.*

George Vey had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-one years and two months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, November 13, 1882 (from attestation papers).

Private George Vey 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. Last updated – January 23, 2023.