

**Private  
Thomas  
Walsh,  
Number  
715439,  
of the**

**26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (New Brunswick), 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-flash of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (New Brunswick), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is from the [bing.com/images](http://bing.com/images) web-site)**

**(continued)**

**His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, John Thomas Walsh appears to have left information little behind him of the early days of his life at Point Verde in the District of Placentia, or of his later movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to**

the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was present in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney in November of the year 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted.

His first pay records show that it was on November 20, 1915, that the Canadian Army\* first began to remunerate Private Walsh for his services to the 106<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), by which unit he had been *taken on strength* and attached to 'D' Company on the same date. On that same day he was also attested.

*\*The term 'Canadian Army' was not to come into official use until 1940.*

These first formalities took place in Sydney, but it was apparently not until December 4, two weeks later, that he underwent a medical examination, a procedure which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*...nor was it until that day that a magistrate formally witnessed the oath taken on November 20.

When it was that Private Walsh would now proceed for training with the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion is not clear but it *is* clear that it was to the town of Truro that he was to travel from Cape Breton, for this was where his unit was headquartered. It was also on a date before February 15, 1916, as on that day he was admitted into hospital on Willow Street in Truro because of measles. Private Walsh was to remain there for three weeks less a day, until March 6, when he was released to return *to duty*.

He was there of course two days later, on March 8, as this was the date on which the Commanding Officer of the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Major Robert Innes - not long afterwards to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel - declared – on paper – that...*Thomas Walsh...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Thus came to a conclusion the formalities of Private Walsh's enlistment.

According to an account written by one of the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion's other recruits, the first young men who had enlisted in Cape Breton, having been transferred southward to Truro for the express purpose of, ostensibly, undertaking training, had been boarded in either local hotels or in the Y.M.C.A..

There was, however, apparently – this from the same source – to be very little training undertaken: at Truro there had been available no barracks, no firing range and no parade ground, and it would seem that shovelling snow and marching had comprised much of the exercise for the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion's Truro detachment during the first six months of the unit's existence.

It was to be further nineteen weeks after the events of March 8 before Private Walsh and his 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion then embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain* in the harbour at Halifax. The date was July 15 of 1916.

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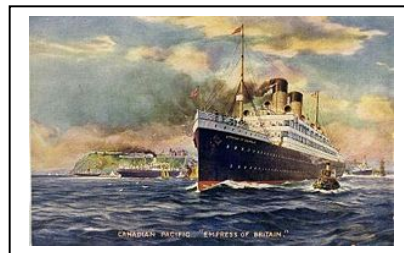
The unit was not to travel alone during its trans-Atlantic crossing; also taking passage on the vessel were the 93<sup>rd</sup> and 105<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry, the 1<sup>st</sup> Draft of the 63<sup>rd</sup>



Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*), the 5<sup>th</sup> Draft of the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the 8<sup>th</sup> Draft of 'C' Battery of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.

(Right below: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Wikipedia website.*)

The *Empress* sailed later on the same July 15, and docked some ten days later again in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on July 25. From there Private Walsh's unit was transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* which had by that time been established on the Dover Straits in close proximity to the town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent.



Some ten weeks following, the mandatory training by then having been completed at the subsidiary *Lower Dibgate Camp*, the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion might have been expecting its cross-Channel transfer to *active service* on the Western Front. But this was not to be\*.



(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*)

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

*However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front.*

*By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and these were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.*

By October of 1916 of the *Great War*, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for almost two months during which time it had suffered horrific losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that much of the personnel of the Canadian units which had remained in England was now to be deployed.



(Right: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial – an unidentified photograph*)

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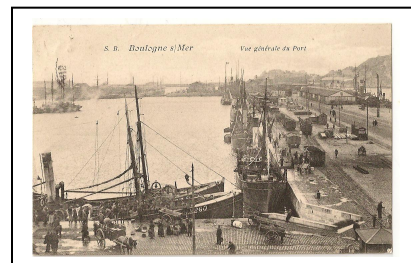
It would appear that Private Walsh was to be among the first to be transferred to another battalion; and while later postings from the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion would be to the new Canadian Reserve Battalions, that of Private Walsh in late September was to be to a unit already in service on the *Western Front*.



(Right: 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 below: An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

On the night of September 26-27 or 27-28 of 1916, Private Walsh departed *Shorncliffe* for the Continent. In all likelihood he passed through the harbour of Folkestone on the English side to disembark in France in the port of Boulogne on the opposite side of the Dover Straits. From there he would have been transported by train to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, in close proximity to the French industrial city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine.



He was either: one of the one-hundred eighty-five or the ninety-nine arrivals from England at that time, of – respectively - September 27 or 28, the latter the date on which he was then *taken on strength* – bureaucratically - by the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*New Brunswick*).

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

Eight-hundred sixty-five men are then recorded as having been despatched from the Base Depot on October 8 to report to various units. Private Walsh was one of them, on his way to join the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion.



His own papers record the date of his re-enforcement draft joining the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion as October 10: that notwithstanding, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary cites October 9 as the day on which the detachment of ninety-nine *other ranks* from the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion reported to *duty* in the area of Berteaucourt-les-Dames where Private Walsh's new unit had been in training for a week.

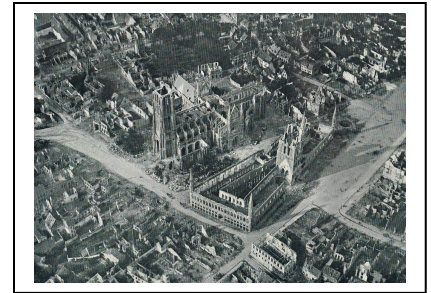
\* \* \* \* \*

The 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (*New Brunswick*) was an element of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, and it had been serving in the *Kingdom of Belgium* since mid-September of 1915. After having landed in - and having been transported through – northern France, the Division had immediately been posted to a sector in-between the by-then battered city of Ypres and the Franco-Belgian frontier.

(continued)

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

The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to spend the subsequent several months of the autumn of 1915 and the winter of 1915-1916 in the same area. During none of the winters of the *Great War* was there to be much concerted infantry action of any consequence on the *Western Front* and this one was to prove to be no exception. This period of relative calm had, however, allowed the unit personnel to adapt to the conditions – to the rigours, the routines and the perils – of life in and out of 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.**

**(Right: 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)**



After that *quiet* winter, from March 27 up until and including April 17, 1916 – these the *official* dates - the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been involved in the *Action of the St. Eloi Craters*. The craters had been formed when, on that March 27, the British had detonated a series of mines - underground galleries filled with explosives – under the enemy lines. The eruptions were to be immediately followed with an assault on the German positions by British infantry units.



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

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The Canadians were ostensibly to take over from the British in order to occupy the *presumed* newly-won territory; however, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, were to greet the newcomers who had taken over from the by-then exhausted British on or about April 4-5-6.

This had been the first major encounter with the enemy that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to experience and it had likely come as a shock to the new-comers. After some three weeks of fighting, at times up to the waist in mud and water, at first the British – and then the Canadians who had relieved them – had been held in check by the German defenders and had incurred a heavy casualty list.

It appears from the Battalion War Diary, however, that the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion itself had been only very *peripherally* involved. During the period of the Canadian action, the unit had been... *standing by*, had been... *in camp*, or, for five days in a row...*Battalion in trenches, Large working parties working on trenches. Weather fine.* Apart from the casualties incurred due to his artillery, the New Brunswick Battalion appears – according to the unit's War Diary - to have had no contact with the enemy.

Then, some six weeks following, from June 2 to 13 had been fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the areas of *Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse*, the village of *Hooge* and of *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps.

The Canadians had, it would seem, been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions dominating the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive which was to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity which, fortunately, they had never exploited.

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



The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too impulsively - by organizing an impromptu counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground of June 2.

Badly organized and supported, this operation was to prove a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to go in – those that had done so, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy had remained where he had been, in the captured positions, and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



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

(continued)



Then for ten more days there had been some desperate fighting, at first involving mainly units of the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division\*, but soon the critical situation had drawn in troops from other Canadian formations.

*\*Officially coming into service at midnight of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had trained for a period in tandem with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division in the Ploegsteert Sector before, in March and April of 1916, having become responsible for a south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been engaged in relieving other units during the course of the encounter and it had been heavily shelled on occasion. However, it had not been in the forward area during much of the infantry activity and had been withdrawn altogether by the day of the final Canadian counter-attack.

By the time that the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to move up to the front once more, on June 14, the fighting at *Mount Sorrel* and its vicinity had been all but over. During the preceding night of June 12-13 the Canadians had once again attacked and, thanks to better organization and a well-conceived artillery barrage, had taken back almost all of the lost ground. Both sides had now found themselves back much where they had been just eleven days earlier – but the cemeteries had now been a little bigger and more numerous.



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

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



Thus, after having played its role at *Mount Sorrel*, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been relieved and had withdrawn to *Camp “D”* on June 20.

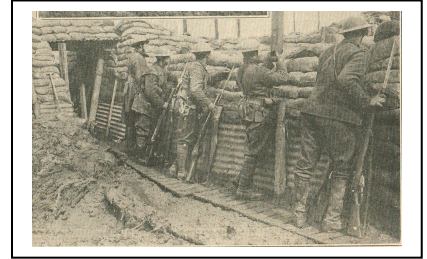
(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooze, Sanctuary Wood Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. Much of any resemblance to a hill was apparently removed during the first week of 1917 when the British detonated a mine underneath its summit. – photograph from 2014*)



The second half of that following month of July was spent at first in *Alberta Camp* and then further back again, at Brigade Reserve in the *Vierstraat Sector*. To compensate for this likely monotonously-calm period, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was then posted back into the forward trenches for twenty-two of the first twenty-four days of August.

Having retired again to *Alberta Camp* near Reninghelst on August 25, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had thereupon prepared to leave Belgium. The Regimental War Diarist has noted in his entry of that day: *All ranks in the best of spirits anticipating the move and eager to effect all details in the number of days training, SOMME OPERATIONS.*

The training area for the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be at Tilques, back over the border in northern France and in the vicinity of the larger centre of St-Omer. It would require three successive days of marching for the unit to reach its billets at Éperlecques by August 28 before then having commenced training on the morrow. One of the first items on the agenda of December 29 had been the replacement of the Canadian-made *Ross Rifle* by its British counterpart, the short *Lee-Enfield Mark III*.



(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.*

A week later the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had marched to the railway-station at not-distant Arques to entrain for the journey south to Conteville. Having arrived there, a day spent resting in billets had been followed by five more on foot *not* resting, a march which had terminated on September 11 at the *Brickfields (la Briqueterie)*, a large military camp in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

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

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

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



As the Battle had progressed, 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 and 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, in September 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)

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

The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had arrived in the area four days prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette – other units had reported there on only the day before – thus those interim days were to be spent in preparation for the attack of September 15. The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been in reserve at the outset and, as such, had not moved forward until five o'clock in the afternoon, twelve hours after the initial assault, at which time it had reinforced the efforts of the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Battalions.

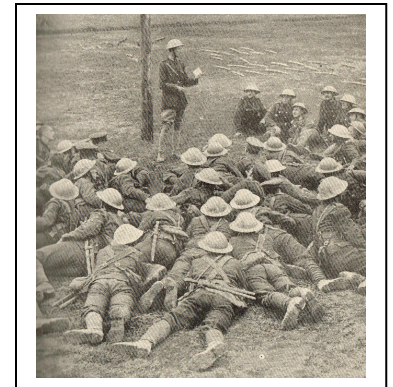
On the following day, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, according to its War Diary, had been ordered moved to the relative safety of a succession of shell holes, apparently having stayed there all day and... *where the most intense shelling was endured by the battalion throughout this entire day.*

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

On September 17 the unit was to be moved once more and had taken up positions in a sunken road, to once again remain there all day. The only exception would be 'B' Company which was to assist in an attack delivered by the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion The attack in question... *met with considerable opposition and rifle and machine gun fire was very heavy.*

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

(continued)





On September 28 the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered forward once again, on this occasion to play a role in *the Battle of Thiepval Ridge*, more specifically on the right flank, in the area of *Regina Trench*. The operation would prove to be a further failure for the price of one-hundred seventy-seven more casualties.

(Right below: *Regina Trench Cemetery* – *Regina Trench* was adjacent to *Kenora Trench*, another daunting German strong-point – and some of the ground on which the Canadians fought during that autumn of 1916 – photograph from 2014)

Only days later, on October 3, the unit was to be beginning to withdraw from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

The Battalion had then retired towards the westward before it was to turn northwards to pass behind, to the west of, the battered city of Arras. It had of course been during this period, while the unit had been engaged in training in the vicinity of of Berteaucourt, that Private Walsh's draft of ninety-nine re-enforcements had arrived to bolster the numbers of the depleted 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion on October 9.



\* \* \* \* \*

Having marched for the following five days, the unit passed into the new area of what was to become more and more a Canadian responsibility, the sectors north of Arras as far as the town of Béthune and had reached the area of Barlin, its destination.

(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916. – from Illustration*)



By the evening of October 15 the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had completed its relief of a British unit in the *Angres II Sector*, in the area of the city of Lens, and was occupying positions in the front lines. On the next day, the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Battalion War Diarist entered simply: *Battalion in trenches Conditions quiet, weather wet.*



(Right above: *This is what was to become of Lens before the Great War ended – from a vintage post-card*)

Those conditions were not to be quiet for long: on the morrow the enemy exploded a mine opposite a trench held by 'D' Company of the Battalion\*. The remainder of the day was spent repairing damage and consolidating the defences. There were no casualties reported on that day but the incident may have reminded some of the troops – perhaps particularly any newcomers - that things could still be bad, even away from *the Somme*.

(continued)



*\*While Private Walsh had been a soldier of 'D' Company of the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion, there appears to be no record of the Company in which he served with the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion.*

The next months in those new sectors must have started to seem rather monotonous for a great deal of the time – although monotony may have been welcome after what many of the troops had recently experienced – with perhaps a few instances of terror thrown in every now and then.

For the most part the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was in that same *Angres II Sector*, in theory spending the one week in the front line, a second week in the support lines, and a third week in reserve – although, of course, it never worked out exactly that way. And sometimes there was even a bath and a bed.

A unit in reserve could count on everything from a variety of inspections from those higher up the military ladder – and every now and then from a leading politician or a member of a royal family – to being seconded into working-parties or the battalion's football team.

While in support there were more working-parties, route marches, training on new equipment, inspections from lesser lights on that same military ladder, more investigations for trench-foot and other medical problems, and the manual transport of ammunition and the like from the rear to the front.



*(Right: A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many duties of troops when in support or reserve – from Le Miroir)*

Most casualties, relatively few in number, were now to be due to the ever-present enemy artillery fire, but snipers were also a constant danger. Disease and living conditions as might be expected – particularly the ubiquitous lice and mites, prime source of scabies – were to take an additional toll. But perhaps surprisingly, it appears to have been dental work that kept the medical services mostly occupied at this time.



*(Right above: A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)*

Then it was spring and the time for the campaigning season to begin. On March 24 the Battalion left Bois des Alleux where it had been spending five days in Brigade Support. It thereupon marched to Grand Servins - *Poor billets...* recorded the War Diarist.

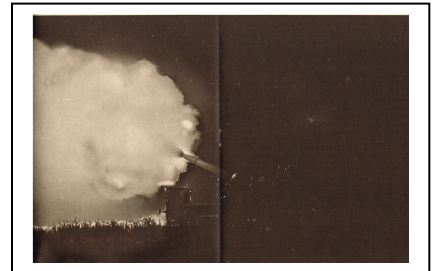
The reason for the move was to undergo special – and in some cases novel – training for an upcoming British attack in the area of Arras. The Canadian Corps was to advance in a sector close to where the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion had recently been operating, in an area where the ground sloped upwards to the top of a German-occupied rise which dominated the entire *Douai Plain*. The crest of the rise in French is called *la crête de Vimy – Vimy Ridge*.

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Among these training exercises were to be some original developments: the use of captured enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; plaster-of-Paris scale models and the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

It was as late as April 8 before Private Walsh's Battalion moved forward towards the assembly areas for the attack and not until four o'clock the following morning that the last elements reached their jumping-off posts.

As those final days had passed, the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion had described it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans had been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn threw retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy.



(Right above: A heavy *British* artillery piece spews its venom into the middle of the night during the course of the preparatory bombardment before the *First Battle of Arras*. – from *Illustration*)

*\*It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it all to happen.*

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the *Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, *Easter Monday*.



While the British campaign proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial* which, since 1936, has stood on *Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)



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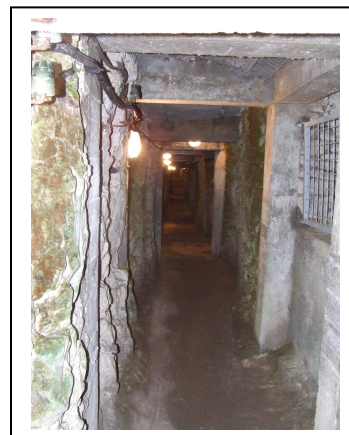
**(Preceding page: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, equipped – or burdened - with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man’s-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)**

**On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, on this occasion acting as a single, autonomous entity – there were even British troops under 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division command - stormed the slopes of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared them almost entirely of their German occupants.**

**Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and sometimes, days – leading up to the attack.**

**The Battalion War Diary notes that the objectives of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion were not on the *Ridge* itself, the prising of which from the grasp of the Germans had become the responsibility of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions.**

**(Right: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years after the event – photograph from 2008(?)*)**



**The Battalion War Diary also notes that, as was the case with many other units, the advance of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion to the... *Jumping Off Trenches...* was to be made over-ground, not through any of those well-known tunnels.**

**The objectives of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion – indeed, of the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division - were in the *Thelus Sector*. Thélus was – and is – a small village further down the slope and to the right-hand side – south in the direction of Arras - of the attack.**

**The creeping barrage having come down at 5.30 a.m., the first wave of the assault thereupon jumped off and...*at Zero plus 32 minutes the light signal (3 white Very lights (flares)) was fired showing that Bn. had reached and occupied their objective. The casualties in the attack were slight and during the rest of the days the Coys. spent the day in clearing the trench and making shelter for the men.* (Excerpt from the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of April 9, 1917)**

**Little further progress was to be made after the successes of that first day, the terrain proving too difficult – because of the weather - for the advance of guns and the necessary equipment – and, as usual, the Germans were quick to recover, although no serious attempt was made by them to retake *Vimy Ridge*. The Battalion remained in the forward area consolidating\* its position until relieved on April 15 when it retired.**

***\*It appears that the Germans may already have been prepared to abandon the Ridge, and had readied positions further to the rear. And in any case, the Canadians had been ordered not to press any advantage but...to consolidate.***

**(continued)**



**(Right below: Canadian sappers, having just laid a narrow-gauge railway line across the battle-field, use it immediately to evacuate the wounded of both sides - the photograph taken on the field or in the vicinity of Vimy Ridge – from Illustration)**

It had then been an all-too-short ten days, until April 25, before the unit was ordered forward again, into support positions where, towards the end the month, its personnel was employed in digging new trench positions so as to be in a position to support Canadian attacks going ahead in late April at Arleux-en-Gohelle and later, in early May, twice at Fresnoy.



These costly operations went ahead – the first a relative success, the second a lot less so - but apparently the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to be heavily involved. Once again, most of its casualties seem to have been due to enemy artillery action.



**(Right: German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration)**

After the five-week *Battle of Arras* had stuttered to its conclusion – officially on May 15 - the remainder of the month of May and most of June were spent by many Canadian units, including the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, withdrawn from the line, the time to be partially used for reinforcement and for further re-organization.

On July 1, Dominion Day, however, Private Walsh's 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was on its way up to the forward area and by the following day was in Brigade Reserve, once more in the *Angres Sector* in the vicinity of the mining centre of Lens.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> the unit was yet again in – or in the area of - the front lines and by the 20<sup>th</sup> the Battalion War Diarist was recording preparations being made for... *the coming show*.

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and his reserves as well - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

**(Right above: An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from *Le Miroir*)**

(continued)



For the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the end of July and the beginning of August of 1917 were to comprise a succession of days of training. The Canadian Corps, since *Vimy Ridge*, was from now on always to fight as an autonomous entity; its now-apparent military capability was also to be exploited to a much greater extent than had been the case in earlier days.

One of the primary objectives was now the so-named *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens. On August 14, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion and other 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division units moved to their assembly areas. On the 15<sup>th</sup> the attack went in.

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of the slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.



Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

(Right above: *The monument to commemorate the capture of Hill 70 by the Canadians stands some hundred metres or so from its apex, this point just to the left from where the roads intersect. – photograph from 2014*)

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)



Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the seeming dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16<sup>th</sup> several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

As far as the actions of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion at *Hill 70* are concerned, excerpts from Appendix Number 5 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary give a general idea: *At 4.25 a.m. on Wednesday, 15<sup>th</sup> August the Artillery opened up and the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion on the Right and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the Left advanced to the attack, closely followed by the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Battalions respectively. The objective...was the BLUE Line. ...the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Battalions, which were to pass through the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Battalions...would also advance at Zero hour until clear of the German Front Line so as to avoid the enemy barrage. This proved most successful and the casualties...were very light.*

*The Blue Line was captured on scheduled time, namely, at 4.51 a.m.*

(continued)

**At 5.24 a.m. the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Battalions passed through...and advanced on the GREEN Line which they captured at 5.42 with the exception of the Left Company of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion which was held up...by Machine Gun fire and Bombers. ...this Company, however, captured their objective by 7.15 a.m. The whole of the GREEN objective was now in our hands...**



**At this point the Germans counter-attacked the positions held by the sister 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion but they were driven off.**

**(Right above: A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, hidden from aerial observation under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir)**

**The remainder of the day was spent in consolidating the positions gained and clearing the battle-field. The consolidation was carried out...and Machine Guns were placed in Strong Points.**



**(Right: Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir)**

**Having repulsed several further German attempts to re-gain their lost ground - those counter-attacks accompanied by heavy bombardments and hostile aeroplane activity on both August 16 and 17 - the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved and retired into the area of the former British front line.**

**But Private Walsh was not one of those to march there in the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion's ranks.**

**The son of William Walsh, former fisherman, deceased November 9, 1914, and of Bridget Walsh (née Conway) - to whom as of July 1, 1916, he had allotted the monthly sum of ten dollars from his pay – of Point Verde, Placentia, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Edward, to May, William, Emma, Ellen, Patrick-Francis and to Emelia-May.**



**(Right above: The photograph of Private Thomas Walsh of the 15<sup>th</sup> Platoon, 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the [www.angelfire](http://www.angelfire.com) web-site – A short history and photographic record of the 106<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., Nova Scotia Rifles.)**

**Private Walsh was reported as having been killed in action on August 15, 1917, during the fighting at Hill 70.**



**John Thomas Walsh had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty years and two months: date of birth at Placentia, Newfoundland (from attestation papers), August 1, 1895: however, the Placentia Roman Catholic Parish Records cite the date as having been July 22 of the same year.**

**(continued)**

**(Preceding page: *The sacrifice of John T. Walsh is honoured on the community War Memorial in Placentia. – photograph from 2016*)**

**Private Thomas Walsh 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 23, 2023.**

