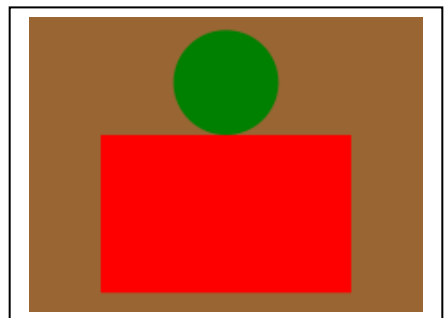




**Private Stephen Weeks (Number 177816) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (Western Ontario), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Sunken Road Cemetery, Contalmaison: Grave reference I.D.11..**

***(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (Western Ontario) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)***

**(continued)**



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *clerk*, Stephen Weeks appears to have left behind him no history of his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Québec. All that may be said of him with any certainty is that by the end of the year of 1915, he was a resident of 101 Laporte Avenue in the city of Montreal where he was living in the company of his father, for that was where and when he enlisted

That enlistment took place in Montréal on November 25, 1915, as his attestation papers and his first pay-records both confirm. A medical examination which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force* was undergone on the following day at which time his attestation of the day before was confirmed by a local justice of the peace. Private Weeks was thereupon *taken on strength* by the 87<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*).

The *official* conclusion to the formalities of Private Weeks' enlistment came to pass only five days afterwards, on December 1, when an officer - with an unidentifiable name - acting on behalf of the Officer Commanding the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Irving Putman Rexford, declared – on paper – that...*Stephen Weekes (sic)...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

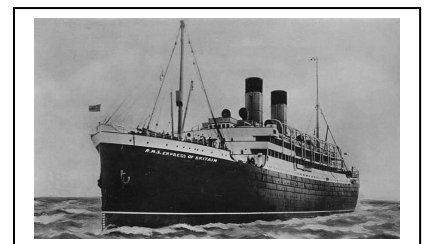
Private Weeks likely trained with his 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion at the newly-opened – in April of 1914 – Canadian Grenadier Guards Armoury on Esplanade Avenue, Montreal. The unit had been recruiting only since September of 1915 but was apparently prepared, both in numbers and the quality of its instruction, to be despatched to *overseas service* in April of 1916.

However, it was not all to be training for Private Weeks. A case of tonsillitis had intervened and he had been hospitalized in St-Jean from January 9 to 12. He had thereupon returned to *duty* on that latter date.

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) boarded ship in the harbour at Halifax on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of April of the spring of 1916. It was the *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company* vessel *Empress of Britain* on which Private Weeks' Battalion was to take passage to the United Kingdom in the company of the 72<sup>nd</sup> and 76<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the Number 3 Party of the 224<sup>th</sup> Battalion and a re-enforcement draft of the 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.

(Right below: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

The *Empress* sailed on April 25 to dock nine days later, on May 4, in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. From there the unit was transported southwards by train to the Canadian military camp established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which place *Camp Bramshott* owed its name – in the county of Hampshire.



(continued)

Before they were to depart on *active service*, that is to say to a theatre of war, Canadian soldiers were encouraged to allocate a monthly sum from their pay to a recipient of their choice. It was often a parent or other family member and such was the case of Private Weeks who allotted a monthly twenty dollars, as of May 1, 1916, to his sister, Elizabeth, she also living in Montreal. He then also penned a Will some six weeks later, on June 12, while at *Camp Bramshott*, a paper on which he bequeathed his everything to, again, Elizabeth.



(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*)

On June 18, Private Weeks, six days after having written that Will, was called to *active service* on the Continent and crossed the English Channel on the night of June 18-19.

Likely having travelled through the English port-city of Southampton and then the French industrial city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine, on that second date he reported to the nearby Canadian Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp* where he was officially transferred from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion and *taken on strength* by the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Western Ontario*).

Private Weeks was not to spend long at *Rouelles Camp*; despatched from there on either the day of his arrival or the next, he was to report *to duty* – according to his personal dossier - with his new unit on June 21, 1916, by then posted to south-west Belgium, well to the rear in the *Connaught Lines* where the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been resting, re-organizing – and now re-enforcing – after the exertions of the confrontation of only days before in the vicinity of *Mount Sorrel* (see further below).

The fact that Private Weeks was just one of a draft of two-hundred eighty *other ranks*, all from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*), allows some idea of the casualty numbers incurred by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion only days prior – even though the exact figures do not appear in the available War Diary documents.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some sixteen months prior to this time, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Western Ontario*) had travelled overnight by train on February 7-8, 1915, from the tented camp on the Salisbury plain to arrive at the Avonmouth Docks, Bristol, and to board the troop-transport *Architect*. The personnel, transport and equipment had been all loaded by half-past six on the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> - although for some unrecorded reason it would be a further seventeen hours before the ship was to sail from England.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diarist describes the events of February 9 and 10 as simply...*Open Sea*. On the next day the ship is documented as having...*Arrived ST. NAZAIRE at 12 Midnight*. By mid-afternoon of the following day again, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been put on a train and was travelling to the north of the country.



It was there, in northern France, in the *Fleurbaix Sector*, that the Canadian Division – and thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion – was to spend the following two months.

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

On February 18, having marched to, and billeted in, the border town of Armentières, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had commenced a period of instruction and had been introduced into the trenches, there to be temporarily attached to British units so as to become familiar with the routines, rigours - and also the perils - of life at the Front.

On February 20, a Private Chapman was to be slightly wounded and thus had become the Battalion’s first casualty on the *Western Front*.

Some seven weeks later, on April 6, the unit had marched westward from the *Fleurbaix Sector* before having turned north-west and, after an eight-hour march which was to skirt the Franco-Belgian frontier, it had arrived and encamped in the vicinity of the community of Ouderzeele. There the Battalion would remain to train for the following twelve days when it was to be on the march once again.

The entire Canadian Division, having become accustomed by that early April of 1915 to existence in the trenches\*, had been ordered to occupy positions in a theatre known as the *Ypres Salient* – or simply as *the Salient*, it to become one of the most lethal places of the entire *Great War*. The positions which were now to become a Canadian responsibility were being held by French colonial troops, at the time in a sector to the north-east of the already-devastated medieval city of Ypres.

***\*\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front. The unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.***



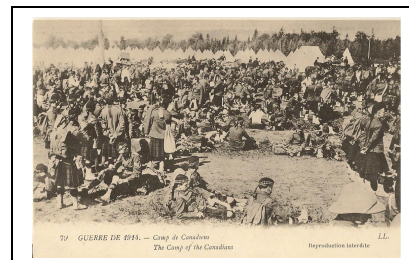
***Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.***

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

(continued)

Thus it was on April 18 that the Battalion – and the other units of the Canadian Division – had turned eastward, had crossed the frontier on that same day, and had moved into the *Kingdom of Belgium*. In two days' time the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to then move into camp on the western outskirts of Ypres. On April 21 it had... *Cleaned billets. Held under orders to move at a minute's notice.* (Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 21, 1915)

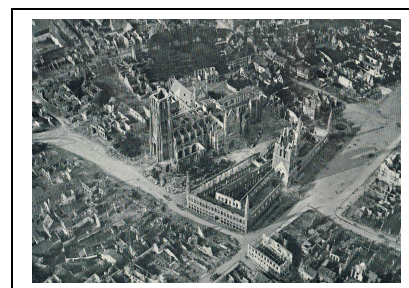
(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit.* – from a vintage post-card)



On the morrow, April 22, the Germans had struck\*.

*\*Most of the units of the Canadian Division, as it was with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, had arrived in the Ypres Salient only days before the attack; in fact, others were still on the move to their new posting at the time.*

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



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas 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 either *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. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, by the entire unit had become necessary.



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

(continued)

By the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan (*St-Julien*) were to be held until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement had become imperative. At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they had not had the means of exploiting the situation.

And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.

It had been at twenty minutes past two in the morning of April 23 that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had eventually...*received orders to move. Marched via BRIELEN over YSER CANAL... Received orders to attack on PILKEN village... Entrenched. Held entrenched positions for the remainder of day. Withdrew at night and occupied trenches thrown up by local reserve during the day.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 23, 1915)

*Remained in trenches occupied the night before. Marched via WIELTJE to FORTUNE. Dug in.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 24, 1915)

*Advanced and constructed support trenches 200 yards south of FORTUNE, supporting an attack on ST. JULIEN... Received orders to retire by route taken on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1915, and held west bank of YSER CANAL, covering from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> pontoon bridges.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 25, 1915)



(Right above: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after elements of the Canadian Division – including the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - were withdrawn to its western bank – west is to the left – photograph from 2014*)

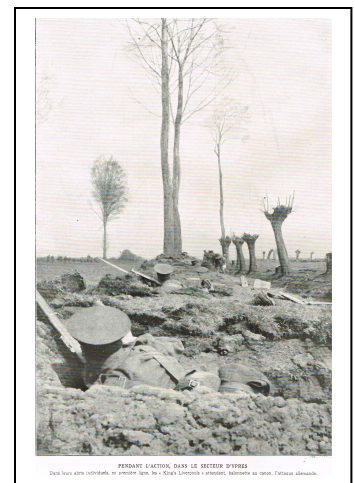
*Held YSER CANAL as above.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 26, 1915)

*Held YSER CANAL as above. Draft of 11 men arrived.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 27, 1915)

(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 only came into use in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

*Same as April 27, 1915. Advanced EAST and constructed trenches on farms... and also assisted Rifle Brigade\*.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 28, 1915)

*\*The Germans were now to attack other sectors in the Ypres Salient, some of those held by British forces among which was serving a Canadian battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.*



*Withdrew and went into billets at VLAMERTINGUE. Route taken the same as on April 23, 1915.* (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 29, 1915)

**(Right below: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> 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*)**

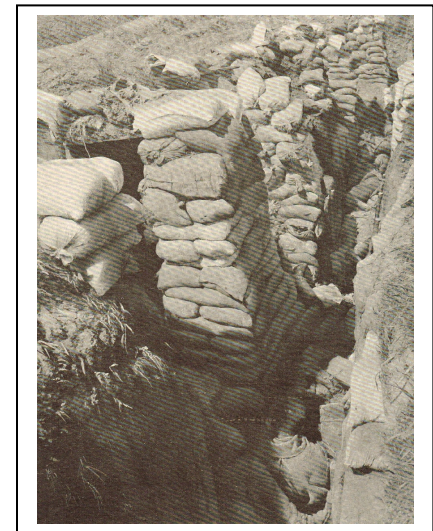
For the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, and for many other Canadian units, the *Second Battle of Ypres* had drawn to a close. A few days had now been allowed for rest and for re-organization before training and re-enforcement was to begin, the Canadian battalions to be withdrawn into northern France for these purposes.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion had left its camp at Vlamertingue on May 2, for some reason having started its trek at half-past nine in the evening. The column was to reach the northern French town of Bailleul at three o'clock the following morning, having marched in the rain for most of the night. The troops had then apparently been, perhaps not too surprisingly, granted the remainder of that day - and all the next - to rest.



The subsequent ten days had been spent in training, although what exactly the various exercises undertaken by the Battalion personnel had then been has not been documented by the Battalion War Diarist. And then, on May 14, the Battalion had been ordered moved some thirty-five kilometres to the south-west, to billets in Calonne – another six-hour overnight march followed by a day-time rest. The Canadian Division – and thus the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion – was about to become embroiled in another confrontation with the Germans.

The orders issued had been that the Canadian Division was now to be transferred further south into France and into the areas of the small communities of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further to the south again and had asked for British support.



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

There at Festubert and then at Givenchy a series of attacks and counter-attacks was to take place by which the British High Command would manage to gain three kilometres of ground; it would nevertheless also 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.

The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but, not having the same numbers of troops as the British, would not participate in the operation to the same extent.

(continued)

(Right: *The Post Office Rifles Cemetery at Festubert wherein lie some four-hundred dead, only one-third of them identified – photograph from 2010*)



The Canadians had nonetheless suffered heavily. They and the Indian troops - the 7<sup>th</sup> (*Meerut*) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert - had hardly fared better, relatively, than had the British; each contingent – a Division – was to incur over two-thousand casualties before the offensive had drawn to a close.

The French effort further south – having employed the same tactics - had likewise been a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to cost over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

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

(Right below: *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(?)*)

Meanwhile, after having been billeted for several days at Calonne, on May 22 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been moved up to the forward area to act as a re-enforcement for the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade\*. Later on that same day, its role apparently fulfilled, the unit had re-joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and had relieved the Canadian 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion in the front line.



*\*The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was a component of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade but, when necessary, the battalions could be – and were – attached away from their parent brigade.*

Whereas a number of the Canadian battalions – those of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigades – were to be involved in offensive operations against the Germans – without a great deal of success and also incurring heavy casualties – the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Battalion, according once again to the unit's War Diary, had spent the whole of its seven-day tour of duty in constructing new positions, in improving those already existing, and in avoiding heavy German artillery fire.

On May 28 the Battalion had been relieved in turn and had retired to *Indian Village*, a cluster of houses behind the lines yet still close enough to be heavily bombed on the days that had followed. Three days later, on the final day of the month, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn further, to the area of Croix de Fer. For the Canadian Division the engagement at Festubert had come to its end: it was now to move several kilometres to the south to serve at the lesser action at Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*.

(continued)



*\*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.*

It was to be on the morning of June 15 that the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been ordered moved into the front-line trenches at Givenchy to put in an attack on German positions at six o'clock on the evening of the same day.

*(Right: The main north-south road at nearby La Bassée at the time of the fighting at Festubert and Givenchy-la-Bassée in the summer of 1915 – from Le Miroir)*



In the meantime it had spent the first six days of the month not only resting, but enjoying the luxury – and likely the necessity - of a bath.

This had been followed by inspections, a route march, lectures about bombs (*grenades*), physical training, and a change of lodging on June 10 with new billets and bivouacs in and about the hamlet of Le Preol.

Minor movements in preparation for a return to the forward area were to be made in the ensuing days but, perhaps more important had been the exchange that took place on June 13: the Canadians had turned in their *Ross Rifles\**, which had served so unsatisfactorily in the poor conditions at Ypres, and had been equipped with the *British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifle*. The following day was then to be spent in instruction on the use of the new weapon - and a lecture by the Medical Officer on sanitation.

*\*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 end of the summer of 1916 all the Canadian units had exchanged 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.*

Then had come June 15. After a morning of preparation and the mid-day march to its positions, by three o'clock the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion had reported itself as in position. At six o'clock that evening the Canadians had attacked:

*6 P.M., JUNE 15, 1915, GIVENCHY – Advance against German front began. Forward Coy reached German second line trench but owing to exposure of flanks were obliged to fall back before a violent counter-attack to original front-line British trench. This movement was completed by 9.30 P.M. Battalion remained in front line trench (British). (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 15, 1915)*

(continued)

The following day was to be spent evacuating the wounded and burying the dead before the unit had been ordered to withdraw to billets where it had been just days before. On the following day again, having attended the funeral of several officers, the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion – and with them other units of the Canadian Division - had then begun to retire entirely from the area and back towards Belgium.

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to march to billets in or near to the community of Gonnehem, some five kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune where the Battalion had indulged in a bath on June 22. From there, on June 25, it had then begun to move towards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just to the north of the frontier.



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

Having reached the *Ploegsteert Sector*, there the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion was to remain – as indeed was the entire Canadian Division.

During the next months it had become well acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any *further* east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

The Canadian Division – even well before this time referred to as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, and particularly when, later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian division had appeared on the scene - had remained in that border area of Belgian West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.

During those autumn and winter months neither side had made much of a concerted attempt to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches. As with all the other units at the front, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion's time had been divided – as seen on a previous page - between postings to the front-line trenches, to the support positions, and into reserve. Casualties had been caused mostly by artillery fire\*, by snipers, and by the occasional raid on the enemy lines.

*\*It is estimated that some sixty to seventy percent of the casualties of the Great War on the Western Front were due to artillery-fire.*

In mid-September of 1915 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had landed on the Continent and had immediately moved into Belgium to take its place in a sector just to the north of the now-designated 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. It too had then spent a relatively-calm autumn and winter in the trenches, but as the first day of spring, 1916, had come and gone, the Division had been preparing to undertake its first major infantry operation of the conflict.

(continued)

It had been at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the British were to detonate a series of mines under the German lines and then had followed this with an infantry assault. The units of the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division had been ordered to be prepared to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the captured ground.



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

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence, were all to greet the newcomers who had taken over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

That of course had been in the sector for which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had been responsible and the troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division would likely have been perturbed by only the din of the duelling artillery.

As for the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, during April and May - on fifty-three days of the sixty-one - the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion War Diarist had seen fit to begin his entry of the day with a report of the day's weather. Following this had been a *mélange* of a litany of trench dispositions, working-parties, the occasional bath, usual aeroplane and artillery activity, the occasional raid by either side, casualties, the occasional gas alert and subsequent gas helmet (*mask*) drill – that aforementioned routine of existence in the trenches.

All of that was about to change.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under British control\*. This had been just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area having included the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.

*\*This sector was at the time the responsibility of the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. However, so rapidly evolved the seriousness of the situation that units from other formations were called upon to repel the German onslaught. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division was to be one of those.*

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



The enemy, having been preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians had been allowed the time necessary to patch up their defences.

(continued)

However, ordered by Sir Julian Byng\*, the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike on the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, had then proved to be a horrendous and costly experience for the Canadians.

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



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

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



In the meantime, on that second day of June, 1916, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diarist was to report...*Fine and warm. At 9.30 am. heavy bombardment in direction of Hill 60...*, before later the news that...*Enemy had taken Mount Sorrel and Maple Copse...and then...At 7.15 pm. placed under command 2<sup>nd</sup>. Canadian Infantry Brigade.*

(Right: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close 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. It apparently resembled a hill much more before the first week of June, 1916, when the detonation of a British mine underneath it removed the summit. – photograph from 2014*)



*June 3<sup>rd</sup> – At 2.00 am. ordered to move into reserve of Hill 60 and Mount Sorrel... 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalions counter attacked at 7.45 am. after preliminary bombardment of one hour. Attack failed. At 9.50 pm. ordered to relieve 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Battalions in front line. Relief complete 1.50 am. June 4<sup>th</sup>. (Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 3, 1916)*



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

*June 4<sup>th</sup> - ...Battalion in front line. 7.15 pm. heavy enemy rifle and M.G. fire, followed at 7.20 by Barrage all sizes from Valley Cottages to Valley Cutting. No enemy infantry attack...(Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 4, 1916)*

On June 5 there had been apparently little to report except for the rain.

On June 6 there had been an enemy bombardment at quarter past one in the morning, thirty minutes before the unit was to be relieved by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion.

It had thereupon moved back to the area of *Railway Dugouts* while the enemy artillery was welcoming the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion to *its* new posting.

Having then been further withdrawn on June 8, it was to be another three full days before orders had been received by the unit to return whence it had recently come, towards *Railway Dugouts* and beyond, into support positions at *Mount Sorrel* and *Hill 60*. This had been reported as completed by the late evening of June 11.

*June 12<sup>th</sup> – Artillery deliberately bombarding enemys works all day. Intense bombardment from 8.00 to 8.30 pm. Companies commenced moving to assembly trenches 9.30 pm. Battalion with the exception of B. and D. Companies in assembly trenches before preliminary bombardment started 12.45 am...(Excerpt from 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 12, 1916)*

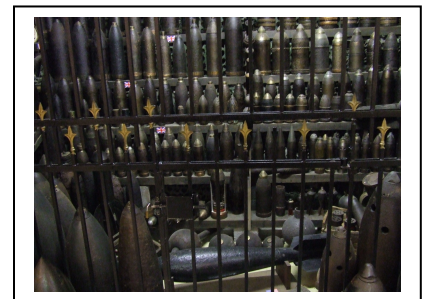


*(Right above: There had been three cemeteries in the area of Sanctuary Wood by the end of June, 1915. A year later, they had all but been obliterated in the fighting in this, the vicinity of Mount Sorrel. The one at the eastern end of the wood was to become the nucleus for the present burial place wherein today lie just eleven fewer than two-thousand Commonwealth dead, of whom some two-thirds remain unidentified. – photograph from 2010)*

*This continued till 1.30 am. when fire was lifted onto the enemy’s support trenches, and the assault on the first objective was launched. ...At the commencement of this period some enemy machine guns on Hill 60 were active but these were silenced before the infantry attack was launched. (Excerpt from Appendix 1 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary for the month of June, 1916)*

The final assault had been over relatively fast, perhaps without the struggle originally anticipated. The Canadians on this occasion had been infinitely better organized and the artillery support well-co-ordinated with the infantry’s efforts, when compared to the debacle of June 3. Apart from a small German gain in proximity to the village of Hooze, both sides had now been back much where they had been before the engagement – the only real change was to be seen in the number and size of the cemeteries.

In the hours after, German snipers had taken their toll and...*the enemy bombardment subsequent to the assault was heavy and casualties were numerous. There was however, no material change in the situation until relief by the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion was effected on the night of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup>. (Excerpt from Appendix 1 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary for the month of June, 1916)*



*(Right: In a local museum at Hooze, a display of some of the multitude of different artillery shells of the time – photograph from 2015)*

(continued)

Having passed the early hours and morning of June 14 at *Camp F* not far removed from Ypres, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Western Ontario*) had been transported to the *Connaught Lines* further back. There it was to rest, to assess and clean equipment, to re-organize, to be inspected on several occasions, to train, to have a bath – it had not been only the equipment which had required cleaning – and to welcome the re-enforcement draft of two-hundred eighty *other ranks* which had then reported *to duty* from the Canadian Base Depot on the twenty-first day of that month.

Private Weeks had arrived to take his place in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

\* \* \* \* \*

After *Mount Sorrel*, life in and around the *Ypres Salient* now reverted to the everyday grind of existence both at the front and behind it. There was to be little infantry activity by either side apart from the constant patrolling and the more and more frequent raids – particularly by the British-led forces whose High Command thought it was good for the troops - not *exactly* how the troops in question felt about them, it would appear.

And there had been the constant stream of casualties, still usually due to the seemingly-eternal artillery fire\* and, less frequent to be sure, but always a deadly threat, the enemy's snipers.

*\*For example, a heavy bombardment of the Battalion positions – once again posted close to the area of Mount Sorrel – on July 9, resulted in some one hundred killed or wounded.*

But while things were quiet in *the Salient*, there had been happening elsewhere on the *Western Front* and by the middle of August the personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion had been ordered into training in anticipation of another move southward into France, on this occasion to the area of *the Somme*.

In fact it was to be on the ninth day of that month that Private Weeks and his comrades-in-arms began to march away to the west from Ypres, by the late afternoon of that day having crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier and taken up billets in the area of the northern French community of Steenvoorde. From there the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's trek continued for the following two days until in the early evening of August 11 it took it into the village of Nordausques.

It was here in north-western France that the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had established a vast training area where the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – Private Week's Battalion had not marched alone – was to prepare itself for what had been presented, by some of the higher strata of officialdom, as *open warfare*.

(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*)



(continued)

At the end of the month, on August 27 - after two weeks of exercises, lectures, drilling and the apparent – from the War Diary – omnipresent musketry - the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion marched to the railway station at Audruicq, there to entrain for the uncomfortable overnight journey southwards to Auxi-le Chateau.

By bus and on foot the unit was now to proceed towards the sound of the guns until it arrived in the provincial town of Albert at mid-day of August 30. There for a single night the personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to take up billets.

On the morrow afternoon, August 31<sup>st</sup>, Private Week's unit relieved the 27<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion in the front-line trenches near Pozières Windmill just north of the Albert-Bapaume road.

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

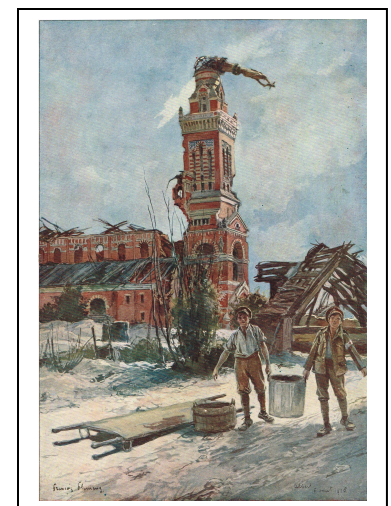


(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands by the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

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

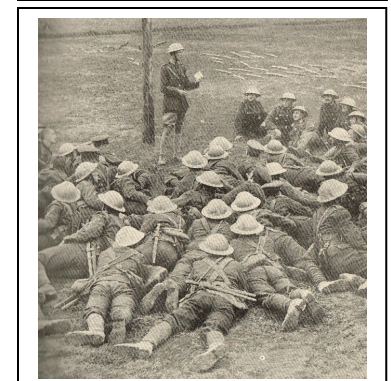
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the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

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 *collective* contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



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

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to remain posted in the front line at Pozières until September 4 when it was relieved and retired into nearby Brigade Support positions.



While having been the attention of artillery at different times during this period, the situation on Private Week's part of the line had been relatively quiet.



The days to be spent in Brigade Support were also quiet with the personnel of the Battalion often being employed in working-parties digging communication trenches and saps. There were also several casualties reported due, as usual, to the enemy guns and marksmen.

(Right above and right: *Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial may be seen in both images. – colour photograph from 2016*)



On September 9 things warmed up as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion to the right attacked the German trenches supported by an artillery barrage. Inevitably the Germans retaliated and not only the positions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion but also those of Private Weeks' unit received their full attention. Later in the day an enemy counter-attack had been repulsed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion but by the late evening the situation had calmed down enough to allow the working-parties to continue their digging throughout the night.



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

The following are excerpts from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 10, 1916: *Sept. 10<sup>th</sup> – Heavy bombardment continued, German heavy guns concentrating particularly on POZIERES village and wood.*

*5 pm. – Battalion was relieved by troops of the 29<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion and 19<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion... 300 men employed on working parties, digging new saps in No Man's Land. Several casualties resulted...*

The son of 'Jack' William John Weeks, fisherman, and of Maria Weekes (née Sparkes - elsewhere Sparks - deceased December 12, 1914, in Montreal) – married December 29, 1875 - of Bull Cove, District of Port de Grave Newfoundland, then later Montreal, he was also brother to at least George, Rebecca, Henry, and Elizabeth (also see further above)\*.

*\*In the event of his becoming a casualty, the authorities had been requested to also contact Alice V. Graves of 371, Metcalfe Avenue, Westmount, Montreal.*

Private Weeks was reported as having been *killed in action* on September 10, 1916, while serving during the *First Battle of the Somme*.

(continued)



Stephen Weeks had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and two months: date of birth in Brigus\*, Newfoundland, September 5, 1895; parish records cite September 15 of the same year.

*\*Recorded as Briggstown among his personal papers.*

Private Stephen Weeks 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.

