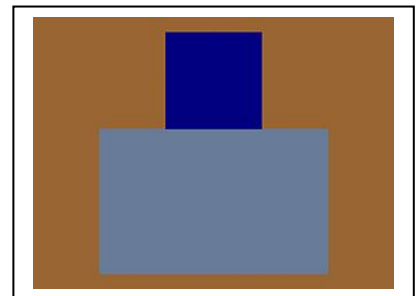




Sergeant James Allison Wheatley (Number 643985) of the 116th Battalion (*Ontario County*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 18-24-26-30.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 116th Battalion (Ontario County), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *school-teacher*, James Allison Wheatley has left little information behind him a propos his early life in the Dominion of Newfoundland. In fact, it is likely that most of that early life was spent in Canada as his father was a Methodist minister who had served in the District of Twillingate as early as July of 1892 – this is confirmed – and who no longer appears in the Newfoundland Vital Statistics records shortly after the birth of his son in December of 1897.

The next records of the Wheatley family appears to be in the 1911 Census, when it was residing in the district of North Simcoe, Ontario, at *the Parsonage* in Elmvale. Accounted for at that time were the father, mother, an older daughter and son who is recorded only as *Allison**.

**In fact, the mistakes made by the automated reader of Ancestry.ca on this occasion renders much of the information – except that on the original document – unreliable.*

His first pay records show that it was on January 3, 1916, that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Wheatley for his services to the 157th Battalion (*Simcoe Foresters*) by which unit he had been *taken on strength* on that day – although where this enlistment had taken place is not recorded. This was followed three weeks and a day afterwards by his attestation – on paper - in Orillia, followed by the witnessing thereof by a local justice of the peace on February 7, also in Orillia, where by then he had his residence – and job?.

Two days later again, on February 9, Private Wheatley underwent a medical examination, an exercise which found him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*.

Curiously, however, it would seem as though Private Wheatley had already been approved for service before either of those last appointments with the justice of the peace or the medical officer: On February 1, the formalities of his enlistment had been officially brought to a conclusion when the Commanding Officer of the 157th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel D.H. MacLaren had declared – also on paper – that...*J A Wheatley...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day, I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

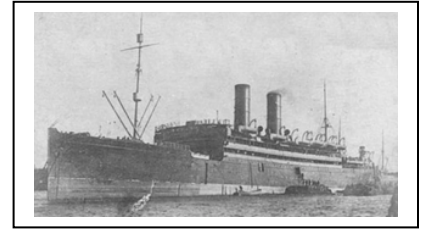
The 157th Overseas Battalion had been authorized in November of 1915, its recruiting to be undertaken by the 35th Regiment of the Canadian Militia*. After a winter of likely little activity, it was issued the responsibility for the construction of a military camp on the Simcoe Pines Plain. Within months, the building having commenced in May, 1916, the complex was ready to become home and training-centre to thirty-six Canadian Infantry Battalion as they waited to be posted overseas. *Camp Borden* serves the Canadian Armed Forces still to this day.

**Militia regiments were organized for Home Defence only, thus, by law, were interdicted from operating beyond the frontiers of the country. However, this did not preclude them from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions – authorized after the Declaration of War in August of 1914 – or many, perhaps the majority, of their personnel from transferring to the aforementioned Battalions.*

Although it was to *train* at the camp they it had built, the 157th Battalion was apparently headquartered in not-distant Barrie, rather than at *Camp Borden* itself.

The unit received its colours on October 12; some twenty-four hours later, Sergeant Wheatley – he had been promoted, it would seem directly from the rank of private soldier, on July 4 - and his Battalion were on board a train travelling towards the east-coast port of Halifax, perhaps a four-day journey as the unit was not recorded as having taken ship until October 17.

The vessel onto which the 157th Battalion embarked was the Anchor Line ship *Cameronia*, at the time perhaps still serving its commercial itinerary of Glasgow – Liverpool – Halifax – New York and return*. Sergeant Wheatley's unit was not the only military formation taking passage on the ship: half of the 166th Canadian Infantry Battalion was also on its way to the United Kingdom.



**Not long afterwards Cameronia was to be requisitioned by the British government as a troop-transport and would be torpedoed in the Mediterranean on April 15, 1917, with the loss of as many as two-hundred ten lives – a second source cites 'only' one-hundred forty.*

(Right above: *The picture of Cameronia is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

The ship sailed on October 18, the day after Sergeant Wheatley's embarkation, and after an uneventful ten-day voyage, docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. The 157th Battalion was thereupon transported to the Canadian military establishment of *Witley Camp* in the southern part of the county of Surrey. There it was apparently to spend but a week before being re-posted to the nearby *Camp Bramshott*, in the neighbouring county of Hampshire, this complex also a Canadian military complex.



(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*)

Now began a process which was to befall a great number of the Canadian Overseas Battalions – in fact the majority of them: its personnel was to be used to re-enforce other units already serving on the Continent*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to 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 below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions 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 they were gradually absorbed, particularly, after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

(continued)

It was to be less than two months after his arrival in England that Sergeant Wheatley was in his turn transferred to another battalion, one that soon was to be crossing over to France. He was *taken on strength* on December 8 of 1916 by the 116th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Ontario County*) stationed by then at *Witley Camp*. At almost the same time, on January 9 of the New Year, 1917, he reverted to the rank of acting corporal in order to...*conform with establishment* – the unit already having a full complement of sergeants*.

**It made a difference to his income as well: the one dollar thirty-five cents paid to sergeants per diem was reduced to the one dollar ten cents of a corporal, and his former daily fifteen cents field allowance dwindled to ten cents.*

On February 11 of that year the 116th Battalion proceeded overseas, passing through the harbour of Folkestone on the English side of the Dover Straits before disembarking only hours later at one o'clock in the afternoon in the port town of Boulogne on the French side.

(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

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

The ship on which it had made the crossing, while recorded only as *Victoria* by the Battalion War Diarist, was likely in fact the *Princess Victoria*, requisitioned from the Larne and Stranraer Steamboat Company by that time as a troop transport.

(Right: *An image of the SS Princess Victoria in 1912, the year of her launching, from the Clyde River Steamer Club web-site*)

The 116th Battalion arrived in France from England on that February 11, 1917, to become an element of the 3rd Canadian Division. The unit, having disembarked in England from Canada the previous summer, and until its transfer to the Continent, had provided reinforcements for other Canadian units. Now it was to play a direct role – more or less.

The 3rd Division already had a full complement of four battalions in each of its three brigades, thus the 116th Battalion was, at least temporarily, superfluous. After some preliminary training and organization it had been divided among the four battalions of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade – one platoon of the Battalion per company of the Brigade.

For the next while, not only was training undertaken in this fashion, but so were operations using the same arrangement of personnel. However as the time for the impending British spring offensive drew ever closer, the 116th Battalion once again became a unit unto itself, to ready itself for its role in that confrontation – a role that appears not to have existed.

(continued)



On April 9 of 1917 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 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 to be 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)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – with some British units under Canadian command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

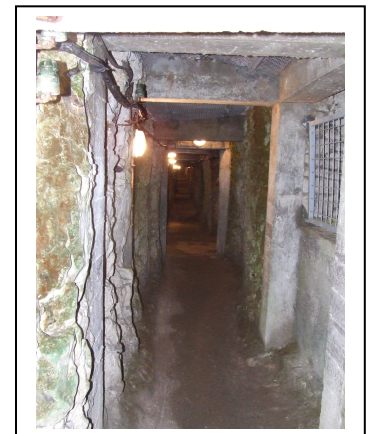


The Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions had been allocated responsibility for *Vimy Ridge* itself; to their immediate right was the Canadian 2nd Division, attacking in the area of the village of Thélus on the southern slope; and to the right again the Canadian 1st Division had been ordered to clear the area lower down the slope again, towards the village of Roclincourt and, farther afield, the city of Arras.

(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, 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*)

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

On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of *Vimy Ridge* of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks.



(continued)

There had on those first two days been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success was not to be: not only had orders been issued to consolidate rather than continue the advance, but the weather had rendered impossible any movement forward of guns and supplies. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

The part played on April 9 by the 116th Battalion *also* appears to have been one of inertia, the orders issued to the unit having been those of... *bringing scheme of consolidation after attack, into effect*. On April 10 it supplied a working party of one-hundred fifty men: on the next, April 11, it moved into support positions and sat there all day to be targeted by the enemy artillery.

It must have been with mixed feelings that the Battalion War Diarist entered the casualty count for those three days on *Vimy Ridge*: eight dead and twenty-four wounded.

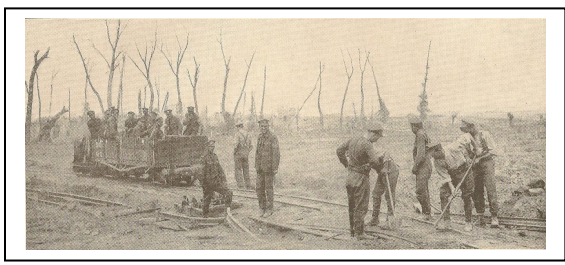
Orders were now to come, on April 17, from the 9th Brigade Headquarters: the 116th Battalion was to become a Canadian Pioneer Battalion* - in fact, work-parties from the Battalion had just days before completed some road-building - and to be attached to the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

**Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction and repairing, and also the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his physique and also for his experience in such work.*



In the case of the 116th Battalion it would seem that expediency also had had a part to play.

(Right above: The caption to the image, translated, reads: Canadian sappers building a road somewhere... 'in liberated territory' – from Le Miroir or Illustration)



**In fact, much of the work done was also the responsibility at times of the Engineers.*

(Right: The Pioneer and Entrenching Battalions were also at times put to work on railway construction, although this more and more became the task of specialized units of the Canadian Railway Construction Corps – from Le Miroir)

It would seem that the eventual solution chosen by the High Command had an aura of iniquity about it. The 60th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) of the 9th Brigade, of a strength of more than eleven hundred, was to be disbanded, its personnel distributed to other units – twenty-six to the 116th - and the 116th Battalion was to take the place of the 60th Battalion in the 9th Brigade*.

(continued)

**Two like situations appear to have occurred at this time: that of the 73rd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) whose place was taken on April 19, 1917, by the 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) and that of the 60th Battalion (see above) to be replaced by the 116th Battalion – to the bitter disappointment and, to be frank, resentment of the exiting units.*

The explanation offered was that both the 73rd and 60th Battalions were from the province of Québec and that recruits were hard to come by. It would necessitate more space than this short biography permits to delve into this at times volatile question – but in the case of the Nova Scotia Regiment the fact that its commanding officer – he also CO of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade - was cousin to the Canadian Prime Minister made some people wonder at the time.

This replacement was effected during the period of April 28 to 30 – leaving, perhaps not surprisingly, a somewhat bitter taste in the mouths of some of the personnel of the now-defunct 60th Battalion.

Thus on May 1, 1917, the 116th Battalion became a *bona fide* unit of the 9th Canadian Brigade. Yet it would seem - from an admittedly superficial scan of the Battalion War Diary - that a great deal of *pioneer* work still came the way of the 116th to go along with the other routines, rigours and perils of life in the trenches of the Great War*.

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



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

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

The five-week *Battle of Arras* having terminated in mid-May, the 116th Battalion and the other units of the 3rd Canadian Division were now to face a long period of that grind of trench warfare*. This was not to be the case for many of the units of the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions which were serving in sectors from Vimy in the south to Béthune to the north: the Canadian Corps High Command had some offensive work planned for them.

The 116th Battalion had followed in the footsteps of all the other Canadian Infantry battalions and had moved into the sectors from just to the north of Arras as far up the line as the venerable town of Béthune.

Almost this entire region was a coal-mining area, for the French by far the most important in the country, and was thus a prize coveted by both sides.

As the Canadians moved in it became more and more their responsibility and remained so for much of the remainder of the *Great War*.

(Right: *This image is of the historic northern town of Béthune by the end of the Great War, but by the winter of 1917 its destruction was already well under way. – from a vintage post-card*)



**During some of the early days of its service with the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the Battalion was again in the area of Vimy Ridge and was, in fact, residing in Grange Tunnel (see above).*

(Right above: *The village of Souchez, just to the north of Vimy, already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir*)

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



(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*)

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

**It should be remembered that during the Great War the British High Command was in control of not only its own troops but also those from all the British Dominions, colonies and territories.*

(Right: *Canadian troops under fire advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



For Corporal Wheatley, the tasks and duties of that summer were, if not suspended, transferred during two weeks – July 4 until July 18 (inclusive) - to a different venue when he was posted to a “C” Course at the Divisional Training School – its location difficult to ascertain.

One month later, on August 22, upon the transfer of a certain Sergeant Holt to the Canadian Railway Troops, Corporal Wheatley put up a third stripe once more.

(continued)

On July 11 of this as yet routine summer the Battalion... *formed up on the Gouy Road for the reception of His Majesty, King George V, on his recent tour through France.*

Eleven days later, the 116th was to be involved in a raid on enemy positions, a venture which was undertaken during the night of July 22-23. Its objectives were the destruction of enemy positions and also the taking of prisoners for intelligence purposes. This was to be the biggest operation – and the most costly – to date for the unit.

(Right: *George V... By the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – from the bing.com/images web-site)*



The War Diary reports a success on both counts, against which was to be weighed the price of twelve – all ranks - *killed in action*, forty-five *wounded*, and seventeen *missing in action*.

(Right: *Canadian troops in the forward area during the summer of 1917 – from Illustration)*



Elsewhere on the Canadian front, on August 15, a major attack was launched by troops of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in the suburbs of the city of Lens and just to the north, in the area of a small rise known as *Hill 70*.

(Right below: *This was Lens by the end of the Great War although much of the damage had been done by the spring of 1918. – from Le Miroir)*



The 116th Battalion, however, was not to play a part in this particular offensive and on that day was in fact busy marching to billets in Auchel and being inspected on the way by Major-General Lipsett* of the 3rd Canadian Division. On the three days following, cleaning-up, training and baths were the primary topics of the War Diary entries.

**He was one of the few officers of this rank to be killed in action – on October 14, 1918.*

The Canadian efforts in their sector had been expected to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and New Zealanders, and then in their turn the Canadians, were ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.

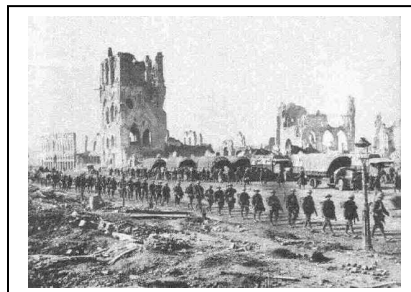


(Right above: *A Canadian carrying-party delivering the trappings of war somewhere on the Western Front in 1917: Apparently the use of the head-band – the ‘tump’ - had been adopted in the Canadian forces from the indigenous peoples at home. – from Le Miroir)*

It was on October 15, that a still under-manned 116th Battalion* began to make its way on foot and by train, to the area of the Franco-Belgian border. Later that day the unit was being billeted in the northern French town of Cæstre where it was to remain and train for the next week.

**It had been operating at some two-thirds regulation strength since August until some re-enforcements – still insufficient - arrived on unrecorded dates just prior to departure.*

(Right above: Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration)



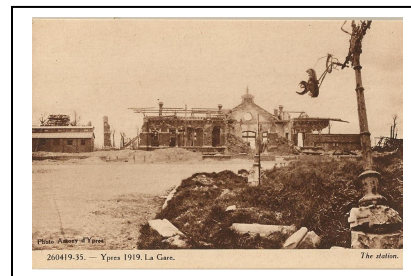
It was then to be on October 22, at fifteen minutes to four in the morning, that the Battalion entrained for Ypres, likely alighting at the shattered railway station just outside the southern ramparts of the city. From there the unit marched through the rubble to the north-east until it reached *Camp X*, close to the village of Wieltje.



(Right: Somewhere, perhaps anywhere or everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration)

(Right: The railway station at Ypres (leper) in 1919, a year after the War – from a vintage post-card)

Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign into which the Canadians were about to be thrust – already ongoing since the last day of that July of 1917 - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.



From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.



From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

(Right above: The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians standing in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010)

(continued)

For the forthcoming three days the Battalion supplied working-parties before, on the 26th, moving forward into close support and providing stretcher-parties for an attack on that day. Its casualties were to be mercifully light – two *killed in action* and ten *wounded*.

(Right: *Part of the battle-field as it is today, just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument on the previous page – photograph from 2010*)



The succeeding days, some spent in the front line before relief permitted a retirement back to Wieltje, were uneventful. They were *all* spent by the Battalion personnel serving in carrying-parties – mostly of ammunition - and working-parties.

(Right above: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)



The complete 116th Battalion War Diary entry for October 29, 1917, reads as follows: *Working-parties supplied. Casualties – 4 other ranks killed, 5 other ranks wounded.*

The son of the Reverend John Joseph Wheatley, Methodist minister, and of Margaret Mary Wheatley (née *Avard*) – posted from 1892 to 1897(?) to the Districts of Fogo and Twillingate, Newfoundland, where both their children were born – he was also brother to Meta-Avard (later married *Griffin*), to whom he as a Sergeant allocated, as to October 1, 1916, a monthly twenty-five dollars from his pay: it was reduced to twenty-two dollars when his rank was also reduced.

Sergeant Wheatley was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 29 of 1917 while serving in the trenches at *Passchendaele*.

James Allison Wheatley had enlisted at the *apparent* age of eighteen years: date of birth on the Little Bay Islands, Newfoundland, December 20, 1897.

Sergeant James Allison Wheatley 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. Last updated – January 24, 2023.

