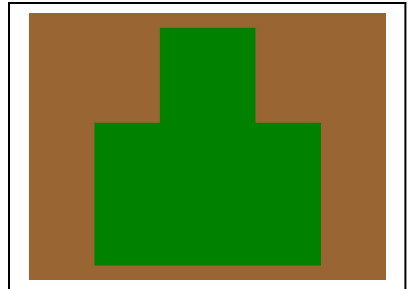


Sergeant Patrick John Whelan*, Number 435680, of the 50th Battalion (*Calgary*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois: Grave reference V.E.12.

**It seems likely that his given names were Patrick Francis.*

(Right: The image of the 50th Battalion (*Calgary*) shoulder-patch is from the bing.com/images web-site)



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a member of the *Royal Northwest Mounted Police* with which he had served for one year, Patrick (*Francis*) John Whelan appears to have left behind him no history of his early years spent in Jersey Side, Placentia, or of his subsequent movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Alberta. All that may be said with any degree of certainty is that he was present in the city of Calgary in September of 1915, for that was where and when he was to enlist.

It was on September 3 that Patrick (*Francis*) John Whelan presented himself for attestation, his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace, and on the same day then to undergo – or perhaps already having undergone – a medical examination which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. At the same time he was *taken on strength* by the 50th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Calgary*) with which unit he was now to serve for his entire military career.

It was now to be six weeks less two days before the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion. This occurred on October 13 when the Commanding Officer of the aforementioned 50th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Edward George Mason, declared – on paper – that...*Patrick J. Whalen...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

The formation of the 50th Battalion (*Calgary*) had been authorized in October of 1914 and thereupon, as the name suggests, it had recruited in the city of Calgary and its surrounds, having begun to do so in that November. It had subsequently begun training in the area of *Victoria Park** before the unit's transfer in July of 1915 to the newly-established complex of *Sarcee Camp* outside the city boundaries and, in fact, on an area of the *Sarcee Indian Reserve*.

**A once grazing area for the horses of the Northwest Mounted Police, before then having become a property of the Canadian Pacific Railway, it is today a dense, urban area.*

Not that Private Whelan was to undergo a great deal of training in Canada: it was likely towards the end of the third week of October that the forty-one officers and one-thousand thirty-six *other ranks* of his 50th Battalion entrained in Calgary for the journey across some eighty percent of the North American Continent to the east-coast port of Halifax*.

**Apparently by this time, one if not two re-enforcing drafts, each of some two-hundred fifty personnel, had already travelled to the United Kingdom to be attached to other Canadian infantry battalions serving on the Western Front.*

It was on October 27, 1915, that Private Whelan's Battalion embarked onto the *SS Orduna* for trans-Atlantic passage. It appears that his unit was to be the sole military formation on board as the vessel was at the time still plying its commercial runs on behalf of the *Cunard Line*, mainly between Liverpool and New York*. The ship sailed later on that same day.



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

**In fact, a part of its cargo on the outward run earlier in October had been to deposit a large quantity of gold bullion in New York. Later, the ship would be requisitioned as an armed merchant cruiser and as a troop transport.*

After an uneventful voyage – *Orduna's* crossings during the *Great War* were not *always* thus – on November 4 the vessel docked in the English south-coast harbour and naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport. From there the 50th Battalion was to be immediately transported by train to the large Canadian military complex being established at the time in the county of Hampshire, in close proximity to the villages of Liphook and Bramshott, this latter lending its name to the camp.



(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*)

Just three weeks after having disembarked in Plymouth, on November 25, Private Whelan was to receive a first promotion, to the rank of (*acting*) corporal his the unit was in need of an NCO of that rank.

At the end of the month of January of the New Year, 1916, Corporal Whelan proved his prowess in at least two of the martial disciplines and was presented with a certificate for such – endorsed by the captain in charge – for both physical training and bayonet fighting.

Corporal Whelan was to be in trouble with the Battalion authorities some three months afterwards as he chose to absent himself without leave from six o'clock in the morning of March 5 of 1916 until a quarter to nine two days later, March 7. For this breach of conduct he was to forfeit three days' pay – one dollar per diem plus a daily ten-cent field allowance: three dollars thirty cents in all – and to receive a reprimand.

This lapse of discipline did not apparently mar his chances of future promotion as, on June 3 (or 5), 1916, Corporal Whelan was confirmed in that rank. What is more, because of the transfer of one of its sergeants to a new unit, another was needed by the Battalion. Corporal Whelan was elevated to the rank of (*Acting*) Sergeant on July 27, 1916, while still at *Camp Bramshott*; then, it would seem only some hours later on the same day, he was to be confirmed in this rank.

Only two weeks later again, the 50th Battalion and Sergeant Whelan were to be on their way to active service on the Continent.

It came about on the night of August 10-11. The forty-six officers and one-thousand twelve *other ranks* of the 50th Battalion embarked onto two vessels, *Marguerite* and *Courtfield*, in the port of Southampton in the late afternoon of the former date, to arrive in Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine at four o'clock the following morning. From there Sergeant Whelan's unit marched to a rest camp more than six kilometres (four miles) distant.



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

On the morrow, August 12, the Battalion entrained at Le Havre, the *other ranks* travelling in cattle trucks – thirty to each – the officers likely having better, for the twenty-three hour journey northwards to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier. There the unit was billeted in the area of the French community of Steenvoorde where it remained to train and to become familiar with the use of gas helmets (*gas masks*) until August 19 when it moved a few hundred metres into a less-comfortable tented camp.

The 50th Battalion (*Calgary*) was a component of the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 4th Canadian Division, and had landed in France at Le Havre – which the War Diarist consistently spells as HARVE - on August 11 of 1916.

As seen in a preceding paragraph, from Le Havre the 50th Battalion had been despatched north to be stationed in Belgium. All four of the Canadian Divisions upon arrival on the Continent were to be sent there*, to the front in Flanders and the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions into the *Ypres Salient*. The 4th Canadian Division was to remain in the rear area for only a few brief weeks before it would follow the other three back southwards and into France.

**The Canadian Division – later re-designated as the 1st Canadian Division – had at first been posted, for two months, just south of the Franco-Belgian frontier in the Fleurbaix Sector. It had then moved up to Ypres just in time to face the first gas-assisted offensive of the Great War.*



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

***The 5th Canadian Division remained in the United Kingdom to serve for training new arrivals from home, and as a reserve pool.*

As the 4th Canadian Division and Sergeant Whelan were arriving in Belgium in mid-August of 1916, the other three Canadian Divisions already stationed there were preparing to go elsewhere. The British High Command had need of their services in its summer offensive further down the *Western Front* in France, a campaign which by that time was not proceeding altogether as had been planned.

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



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

(continued)

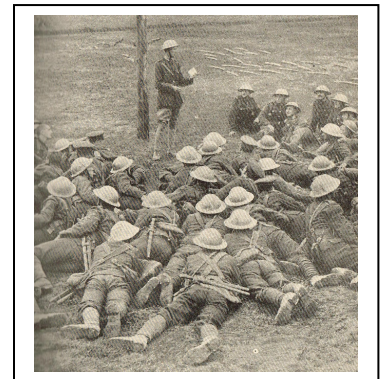
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was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

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



As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on 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 in that September.

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



It was not to be until October 3 that the 50th Battalion – after a sparse five days' training in northern France to where it had withdrawn – entrained at the town of St-Omer to travel south in its turn to the cauldron of *the Somme*. Having travelled all night to arrive in Doullens, it then marched over the course of the next four days to arrive at the large *Brickfields Camp*, in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert.

(Right: *Almost a century after the 50th Battalion passed through it on the way to the First Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation. – photograph from 2015*)

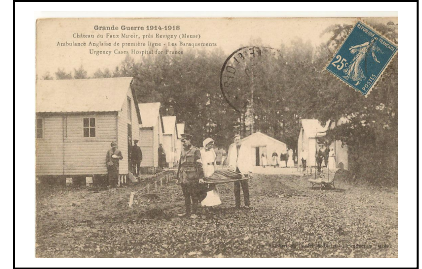


On October 15 the Battalion was posted into the trenches of *the Somme* for the first time. For the next month the War Diary entries report nothing out of the ordinary: *front*, *support* and *reserve*. The 50th Battalion is not recorded as having played a direct major role in any concerted major action - but rather as having been regularly deployed in and out of the trenches – not, perhaps ironically, until *after* the battle had ostensibly drawn to its conclusion.



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

In the meantime, however, Sergeant Whelan was to require four days of medical attention. On October 23 his unit arrived at *Tara Hill Camp* after having been relieved following a tour in the front line and Sergeant Whelan was thereupon sent to the 54th Field Ambulance suffering from a PUO – Pain of Unknown Origin. From there on either the morrow, October 24, or the day following, he was transferred to the 90th Field Ambulance for further treatment.



(Right above: A *British field ambulance*, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card)

Treatment for exactly *what* is not clear: there are no further details to be found in his personal files except that in his personal files he is recorded as having been discharged to duty on the next day again, October 26.

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

The *First Battle of the Somme* has been *officially* judged by those set in authority over us to have come to an end on November 13-15, after the capture of the village of *Beaumont** by the 51st Highland Division. This should, nevertheless, not suggest that there was no longer to be any fighting: an excerpt from the 50th Battalion War Diary entry of November 17 documents that... *Orders received for 'A' and 'B' COMPANYS with Twenty O.R. volunteers each from C** and D COMPANYS to go over the top on the morning of the 18th...*



**This was the village of Beaumont, a part of the Commune of Beaumont-Hamel.*

***This appears to have been the Company in which Sergeant Whelan served but whether he was one of the volunteers in question is not documented.*

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

The attack was to be in the vicinity of *Regina Trench*, a former strong-point in the German defences and a position which had already been attacked on several occasions before having been definitively captured by Canadian troops only days before, on November 10-11.



On this later occasion of November 18, the soldiers of the 50th Battalion advanced under the cover of a barrage and took a small trench and several prisoners without heavy losses. However, as the Battalion began to consolidate these positions, it came under an enfilading fire and was eventually forced to retreat into *Regina Trench* itself.

Thus the episode ended – with a casualty list of two-hundred fourteen all told. The unit was withdrawn to Albert on the following day, the 19th, and, one week later again, on November 26, it was to march westward and away from *First Somme*.



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

* * * * *

It was during the period spent in the town of Albert that Sergeant Whelan was wounded - which proves that billets in Albert were still within German artillery range. Exactly on which date the incident occurred has not been documented but on November 24 Sergeant Whelan was admitted into the 1st Canadian General Hospital established by then in the coastal town of Étaples; he had sustained shrapnel-wounds to his left arm and thigh, and was also suffering from a sprained back.

He was to remain in hospital for almost two weeks before, on December 7, his release from there to the nearby 6th Convalescent Depot where a further week was to pass – different sources disagree on the length of time spent at the 6th Convalescent Depot. Despatched...*fit for service*...from there to serve at Base Details, presumably at the Base Depot close to Le Havre, Sergeant Whelan returned to his unit on the 25th of the month, Christmas Day of 1916.

* * * * *

During this same period, after having retired to the west, his unit had then turned northward in a semi-circular fashion behind and then beyond the city of Arras. By December 4 the 50th Battalion had marched some seventy kilometres as far as the area of Divion where it was then to remain in training for a further two weeks.



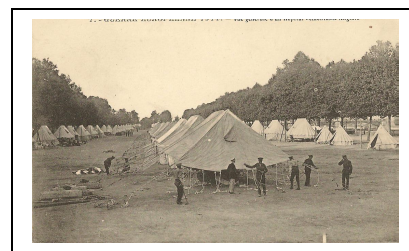
(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916. – from Illustration*)

On December 18 the Battalion begun a transfer to Villers-au Bois where it had arrived on December 20 to undergo several days of training. Whether it was still *in situ* when Sergeant Whelan reported back to duty is not clear as on Christmas Day the 50th Battalion marched back into the trenches to relieve its comrades-in-arms of the 47th Battalion.

It had been relieved in turn since that day but had returned to the front line by January 7 which was the day on which Sergeant Whelan was wounded again: a slight wound to his *right* hand on this occasion, for which he was to be evacuated to the Number 12 Canadian Field Ambulance in the vicinity of Grand Servins. From there on the next day he was forwarded to the Number 6 Casualty Clearing Station at nearby Bruay.

(Right below: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card)

On January 13, his treatment finished, he was discharged to a...*convalescent billet and employed in light duties there...*for the best part of two months. He returned to his unit once more on March 3, likely at Chateau de la Haie where the Battalion reported on that same day after having been relieved in the forward area.



* * * * *

For the soldiers on both sides, the winter of 1916-1917 would be one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids.

In the Canadian sectors this latter activity was encouraged by the British High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.



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

There was to be of course, a constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers; yet it was mostly sickness and dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period. Sergeant Whelan had been an exception to the rule.



Then it was spring and the time for the campaigning season to begin. By April 1 the last of the 50th Battalion's personnel had been withdrawn from the trenches near Souchez, to Vancouver Camp at Chateau de la Haie.

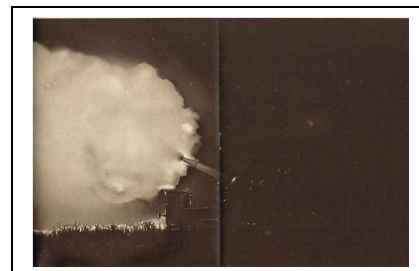
(Right above: The village of Souchez during the period of French responsibility before the arrival of the British and then the Canadians in the sector, the photograph taken in 1915 – from Le Miroir)

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 Canadians had been ordered to advance 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 was known as *la crête de Vimy – Vimy Ridge*.

(continued)

Among these aforementioned 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.

As those final days passed, the artillery barrage grew progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion was to describe 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 were throwing 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.*

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

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 was to be yet a further disaster.

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



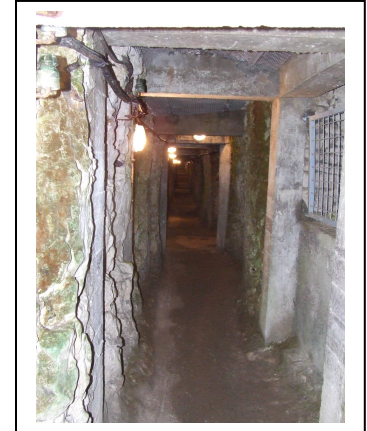
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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 in some cases, days – leading up to the attack. The 50th Battalion War Diary, however, records that in fact the unit was kept in reserve to support the 11th and 12th Battalions on April 9.

It was not until late in the evening that it moved forward to the support line and thus it was not to avail of the protection that the tunnels offered.

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

**This was the first occasion on which the Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as a Canadian Army Corps rather than being attached to a British force. In fact, as seen above, British forces were now placed under its command.*



On April 9, the 50th Battalion had incurred a total of six casualties, two *killed in action* and four *wounded*. However, on the following day, the unit was involved in the successful attack on *Hill 145**: casualties for April 10, sixty-two *killed in action*, one-hundred thirty-six *wounded*, and thirty-one *missing in action*.

**On top of which today stands the Canadian National Memorial*

The Germans, having lost the *Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, retreated some three kilometres into prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to prove less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May. And as ever, it was a costly business.

As for Sergeant Whelan's 50th Battalion, it would remain in support and then in the front lines after the attack on *Vimy Ridge* until April 13 when it had retired to *Vancouver Camp* and then *Ottawa Camp*, ostensibly to rest, re-organize and re-enforce, but nonetheless, to supply work-parties on frequent occasions.

The re-enforcement was not a great success, only eighty-three *other ranks* having arrived during this period. By the time that the unit moved from *Ottawa Camp* back to the forward area, on this occasion towards Liévin, adjacent to the mining centre and city of Lens, on April 24, the 50th Battalion's *marching strength* was down to twenty-two officers and six-hundred fifty men.

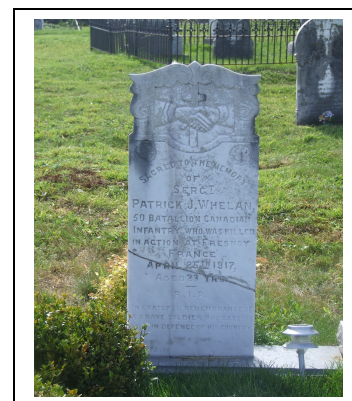
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The 50th Battalion War Diary for April 25 reads as follows: **1 AM – Relief complete - Line consists of Rly embankments, no trenches or dug-outs – Men busy making funk-holes – Constant night patrolling – Enemy active and nervous – Casualties ORs 3 killed 2 wounded – Weather-fine**



(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire in No-Man’s-Land during the summer of 1917 – From Le Miroir*)

The son of Thomas Whelan - to whom as of November 1, 1915, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - and of Mary Kate Whelan (née *Dunphy*) – to whom on February 29, 1916, he had willed his all (although dated on an impossible 1915) – of Jersey Side, Placentia, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Andrew, Margaret-Joseph and Andrew-Joseph (twin), Mary-Margaret, John, Thomas-Peter, Teresa-Marcella, Frederick and to Raymond.



(Right: *Sergeant Patrick J. Whelan is also commemorated on this memorial to be found in Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery at Placentia. – photograph from 2016*)

Private Whelan was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 25, 1917, while serving in the trenches near Liévin.



(Right: *The War Memorial in the community of Placentia honours the sacrifice of Sergeant Patrick J. Whelan. – photograph from 1916*)

Patrick (*Francis*) John Whelan* had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and eight months: date of birth at Placentia, Newfoundland (from attestation papers), December 5, 1892. Parish records and the original Newfoundland Birth Register both cite the same date but the year of birth as having been 1893.



**At birth he was named Patrick Francis Whelan; however, the Placentia War Memorial has Patrick J. Whelan.*

(Right above: *The photograph of Sergeant Whelan and that of his grave are from the Provincial Archives.*)

Sergeant Patrick John Whelan 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 23, 2023.