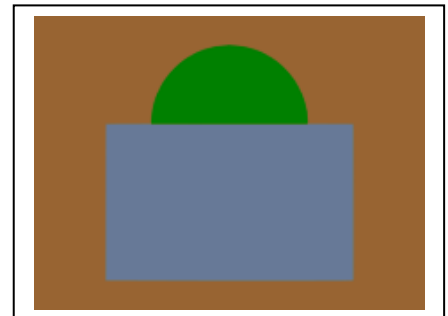


Private Harry White, Number 817198 of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the PPCLI Battalion shoulder-flash is from the Wikipedia web-site.)



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *carpenter*, Harry White appears to have left behind him no history of either his early years in St. John's, or his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of the Canadian province of New Brunswick. All that may be said with certainty is that he was present in the community of Sussex in October of 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted.

His first medical examination records the 23rd day of that month as that on which Private White was *taken on strength* by the 104th Overseas Battalion*. This was not the date, however, on which he presented himself for that same medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*: that was November 4, the day on which he then underwent attestation, his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

**Apparently before the unit was even authorized, the official date for this event having been December 22, 1915 – the same day as had been authorized Private White's next battalion, the 140th.*

On the following day, November 5, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by a lieutenant colonel with an illegible signature - when he declared – on paper – that...*Harry White...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

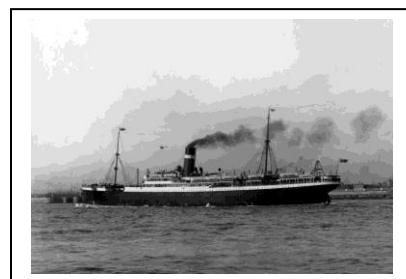
Less than six weeks later, on February 6, 1916, Private White was transferred to another overseas unit, the 140th Battalion (*Saint John Tigers*)*. It was with this unit that he was to take passage to the United Kingdom at the end of September after a spring and summer of training in the area of Saint John, perhaps some of it at the newly-built *Barrack Green Armoury* located in city*, but surely some of it at *Valcartier Camp*, Québec, where he was to spend five days in hospital, from July 26 to 30, undergoing treatment for *quinsy*.



(Right above: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – but also at some distance from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – photograph (from a later date in the War) from *The War Illustrated*)*

**In the area of Sussex there was also a large military camp.*

It was on September 25, 1916, that the 136th and 140th Battalions of Canadian Infantry embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Corsican* in the harbour at Halifax. Two days later the vessel weighed anchor and, after an uneventful voyage of some nine days, *Corsican* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool.



(Right above: *The photograph of HMT Corsican is from the Maritime Quest web-site.*)

(continued)

From Liverpool the 140th Battalion was transferred from dockside by train, apparently to the Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* established on the *Dover Straits* in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone.

Cæsar's Camp itself, to where the battalion was posted, stands on a hill north of the town, a site associated with camps and castles during much of its three-thousand year-old history, and the Canadian Army was to continue that tradition during the period of the *Great War*, *Cæsar's Camp* being a subsidiary facility of *Shorncliffe*.



(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

Not that the newly-arrived 140th battalion was to linger at *Cæsar's Camp* for very long: four weeks less a day after its arrival the unit was to be divided and its personnel ordered either to the newly-forming 13th Reserve Battalion (*New Brunswick*) stationed at *Bramshott Camp* in the county of Hampshire or to the combined RCR & PPCLI* Depot at the South Camp, Seaford, on the south coast of the country.



**Royal Canadian Regiment and Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.*

(Right above: *The community cemetery at Seaford in which are buried a number of Canadian soldiers, including two Newfoundlanders: Frederick Jacob Snelgrove and Ebenezer Tucker – photograph from 2016*)

It was to the latter that Private White was sent on November 2, 1916, there to be *taken on strength* by his new unit, the PPCLI, on the same day. Just over four weeks after his arrival there, on December 16, he was transferred once more, on this occasion across the English Channel to the parent unit of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry already serving on the Continent.

By the end of the following day, December 17 - likely having passed through the port of Southampton - he and sixty-three other re-enforcements from England had reported to the Canadian Base Depot at *Rouelles Camp* in close proximity to the French industrial city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

Only a further twenty-four hours afterwards, on December 18, Private Cram was on his way again, one of three-hundred twenty-nine men to be despatched to various units from the Base Depot on that December 18.

At the time, the PPCLI was operating in the area of the city of Arras, a distance of some two-hundred thirty kilometres to the north-east. As Private White reported *to duty* on that same December 18*, his draft undoubtedly had travelled by train to Arras itself before having completed the transfer – on foot?

*His personal file cites the date as February 18 of 1917 – hardly likely. In other files a draft is recorded as having left Le Havre on December 18 and as having reported to duty with the PPCLI on that same date, a more plausible scenario. This, however remains unconfirmed.



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

The four fighting companies of the PPCLI on that date were serving in the trenches of the *La Folie Sector*, not far distant from the city and mining-centre of Lens. Its base, transport and details were behind the lines in the reserve area in the vicinity of Neuville At-Vaast and while this is not confirmed by the Battalion War Diary, it was likely to have been there that Private White's draft was directed.

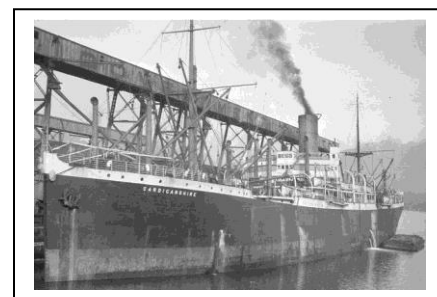
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The PPCLI was not to serve with the other *Canadian* forces until November of 1915 when it became a battalion of the then-forming 3rd Canadian Division. Up until that time, its history as a unit on *active service* had been as part of a British infantry brigade.

The Battalion* of the PPCLI Regiment had officially sailed from Canada on October 4, 1914, on the convoy carrying the first Canadian troops overseas. The unit had then spent the first weeks of its time in the United Kingdom at *Bustard Camp* on the Salisbury Plain, before then having been transferred to Winchester on November 16. There it became attached to the British 80th Infantry Brigade of the 27th Division.

**The PPCLI was – and still is today – a regiment, a force which may comprise any number of battalions: today, in 2017, there are three. Some British regiments, for example, eventually sent twenty or more battalions to serve at the Front during the Great War. Only a single battalion - normally one-thousand strong but during the Great War oft-times often comprising a lesser number - of the PPCLI Regiment ever served at the front.*

Only five days before that Christmas of 1914 the PPCLI Battalion was to march from Winchester to Southampton where it had embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Cardiganshire* and crossed the English Channel to the French port-city of Le Havre. The vessel had docked in the early afternoon, the Battalion personnel then having spent the night in a nearby camp before boarding a train on the following evening. The Battalion War Diarist describing the event:



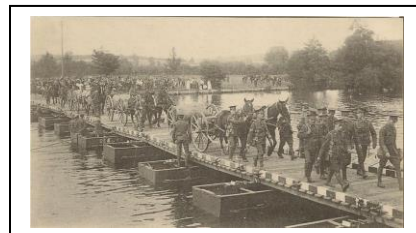
...The whole Battalion had to entrain in one train of 48 trucks. Officers 1, Men 24, Horses 10, VEHICLES 13. Very tight fit, some of the men being unable to sit down.

(Preceding page: The image of HMT Cardiganshire is from The Library web-site. Having survived the Great War, she was sunk in 1940, during the Second World War.)

The Battalion had then travelled northward, to finish detraining at Arques at half-past midnight on December 23 before then having marched for a further two-and-a-half hours to its billets in and in the vicinity of the village of Blaringhem.

This community was to be its home for the following two weeks before a further march* of two-days march into Belgium had next found the PPCLI Battalion in the area of Dickebusch (today *Dikkebusch*), just to the south-west of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.

**Some of the Canadian equipment in the early stages of the conflict left much to be desired – apparently both in quality and quantity. The War Diarist wrote of the march that... Lack of boots much felt, many men marching with no soles at all to their boots.*



(Right above: Troops – said to be British, but the Canadians were soon to wear British Uniforms – on the march in the north of France during the early period of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The Battalion had taken its place in the line on the evening of that same day, January 6, 1915. Its personnel was soon to learn about the rigours, routines and perils of life – and death* - in the trenches**.

**The first to be killed in action, on January 8, 1915, according to the PPCLI War Diary, were Number 252, Corporal W. Fry and Number 1284, Lance Corporal H.O. Bellinger, likely victims of the heavy enemy shelling reported during the early morning – although Wikipedia names a Private Guy Dwyer from Hanover, New Brunswick, as having been the Battalion's first combat casualty of the war on February 4, 1915.*



(Right above: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the Great War there was to be very little left standing. – from Illustration)

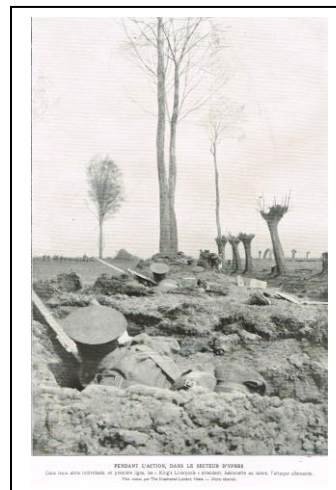
***During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was 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 being the 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 posting at times for weeks on end.

(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – which the PPCLI had already adopted in November of 1914 – from Illustration)

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



The PPCLI was to remain stationed in the vicinity of Dickebusch while in the forward area, at Westoutre while in reserve, and near to the town of Poperinghe when withdrawn further back into Divisional Reserve. At the beginning of April it had been ordered forward again so that by April 14 it had been replacing troops of the Rifle Brigade on the eastern side of the *Ypres Salient*, in trenches in Polygon Wood.

At the same time, French troops in the adjacent sectors counter-clockwise – to the north-east of the city – had been in the process of being replaced by the Canadian Division. Some of those Canadian units had still been in the throes of establishing themselves in their new positions when the Germans had attacked on April 22, for the first time using chlorine gas to precede their infantry onslaught.

(Right below: The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010)

Close though the positions held by the PPCLI had been to the ruptured Canadian and French lines, the Battalion War Diary has noted little activity on the part of the unit; at the end of the month, by which time the situation on the Canadian Front had been stabilized, the PPCLI Battalion had still been lodged in and about *Polygon Wood*. Nevertheless, from April 22 to 30 (inclusive), in contrast to casualties in the Canadian sectors, those of the PPCLI had been light: sixty *killed, wounded and missing* all told.



However, eight days later, the unit was to be called upon to resist a major German attack: In an action designated among its battle honours as *Frezenberg*, on May 8 the PPCLI Battalion had held the new, hastily-prepared positions of the *Bellewarde Ridge* all day until its relief at mid-night by the King's Royal Rifles.

(continued)

By that mid-night the unit had incurred, dependent upon the source, some four-hundred casualties of which one-quarter reported as having been *killed in action*.

(Right: A former non-commissioned officer of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry stands in front of the monument to the PPCLI Battalion which is to be found in the area of the Bellewarde Ridge. The stone commemorates the action of May 8, 1915. – photograph from 2013(?))



The following months, during which the Battalion had undergone re-organization and re-enforcement, was spent at first in the area just outside the *Lille Gate* – the southern entrance to the city of Ypres – then later, south again and across the Franco-Belgian frontier, in the vicinity of the town of Armentières.



Subsequently, after a lengthy period in the area of Hazebrouck, and withdrawn well away from the forward positions, at the end of September of 1915 the unit had been returned to the forward area in the vicinity of the northern French city of Lens, there to spend the two following months.

The PPCLI would later come back to the same area as a unit of the Canadian 3rd Division and the Canadian Corps.

(Right above: *The mining village of Loos-en-Gohelle just to the north of Lens as it was already in 1915 – from Le Miroir*)

These later months of the autumn of 1915 had seen little concerted action by either side, confrontations being rather of a local nature. There had been, of course, a constant stream of casualties, mostly due to the enemy's artillery and also to his snipers. The British and Empire (*Commonwealth*) contribution to the war effort was now growing with Territorial Army units and the battalions of the New Army starting to make their way to the Continent; and further units from the Dominions were also arriving from around the globe to serve in the various theatres of the conflict.

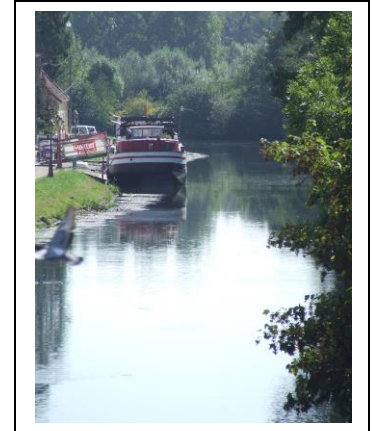
In September of 1915 the 2nd Canadian Division, after months of training in the United Kingdom, had landed in France to take responsibility in Belgium for sectors where, only months before, the PPCLI had been serving. And then units of the soon-to-be 3rd Canadian Division had begun making their way across the English Channel, some to serve at the front on an *ad hoc* basis, until the new parent unit officially came into being.

In November, 1915, the British 27th Division had received orders to prepare for a transfer to the new theatre of war being established in Macedonia, there to fight against the forces of Bulgaria, that country having recently declared for the Central Powers. The first units of this division had begun embarking for the enterprise on November 17.

(continued)

The PPCLI Battalion, however, was not to contribute to this venture in Salonica. On November 8 there had been a farewell parade at which time the Commanding Officer of the 80th Brigade, as spokesman for all of the Canadian unit's now-former comrades-in-arms, had paid his compliments and had offered his best wishes for its future endeavours.

The PPCLI Battalion was to remain at Flixecourt, where it had been posted for the farewell ceremonies and courtesies, until the 25th day of the month when it had marched – accompanied by a fife and drum band - to Pont-Rémy, some fifteen kilometres distant. From there it had entrained for the northern French community of Cæstre. It had there been greeted by Lieutenant-General Alderson, Commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and by the welcoming Band of the 1st Canadian Division, before then marching to its billets two kilometres away.



(Right: *The 'pont' at Pont-Rémy, a stone's throw from the railway station, here traverses the River Somme, another name in both Canadian and Newfoundland history. – photograph from 2010*)

On the morrow morn, that of November 26, the weather gods had welcomed the newcomers in their own fashion: with a heavy snow-storm.

It was to be a further seven weeks before the PPCLI battalion would be posted to the forward area once more. In the meanwhile it had remained in the rear areas of Flêtre and La Clytte. In both encampments the unit was to undergo training, had paraded, had attended courses, had been inspected, had gone to church, had taken infrequent baths, had marched, had been photographed, had played football, had welcomed reinforcements, had furnished working-parties, had had three men wounded by long-range artillery... in fact, just about everything except having fired a rifle in anger.

(Right below: *La Clytte (today Klijte) Military Cemetery in which are buried one-thousand twenty-eight dead of the Great War. Two-hundred thirty-eight of them are unidentified. – photograph from 2017*)

The 3rd Canadian Division was to officially come into being at mid-night on the night of December 31 of 1915 and January 1 of the New Year, 1916. The PPCLI Battalion was to be a unit of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, in the company of the 42nd and 49th Battalions as well as the Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment*. Its first tour in the trenches as a Canadian unit under Canadian command was to begin on the evening of January 12.



**The Royal Canadian Regiment, the senior infantry formation of the Canadian Army, also fielded a single fighting battalion during the Great War. This unit was nonetheless usually referred to as the RCR, rather than as a battalion.*

(continued)

The month of February - all twenty-nine days of it in that 1916 – and the first three weeks of March would continue in the same routine manner, deemed as *normal* on perhaps the majority of his entries by the Battalion War Diarist. The weather, cited from the same source, was usually... *poor*.

The 3rd Canadian Division up until the middle of March had been working much in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division, learning the ropes in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just to the north of the border with France. On March 21, it – the 3rd Division - had been ordered into the area of the *Ypres Salient* to the south-east of the city.

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



The PPCLI Battalion had thereupon relieved the 3rd Battalion of the (British) Rifle Brigade at the *Railway Dugouts* there in that south-east area of the *Salient*, the positions not very far removed from where the unit had distinguished itself in May of the previous year.



The German artillery was to be more active – was *always* to be – in this sector than had been previously experienced by the incoming Canadians, at least by units other than the PPCLI, but there had been little infantry activity other than the incessant patrolling and the occasional raid by both sides.

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

This may have been due to the confrontation ongoing at the time in the *St. Eloi Sector*, now to become the responsibility of the 2nd Canadian Division. However, the personnel of the PPCLI would likely have been aware that something was happening in that area only because of the noise of the guns; it was not to be directly involved.

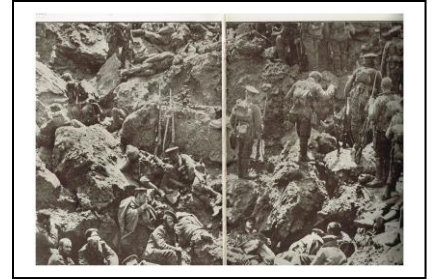
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That *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated series of galleries under the German lines, there to place a series of explosives which they detonated on that March 27 and followed up with an infantry assault.

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

(continued)

(Right: A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, possibly at St-Éloi – from Illustration)



The whole affair was to come to a conclusion – unsatisfactory from a Canadian point of view – before any other units other than those of the 2nd Division needed to become involved.

* * * * *

But then, almost seven weeks later at the beginning of June, it was to be the turn of the 3rd Canadian Division to undergo its *own* baptism of fire.

On June 2 the Germans were to attack the only high ground in the *Salient* remaining under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This had been just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, in the areas of the village of *Hooge* and other places of English-sounding names such as *Maple Copse*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60* and the afore-mentioned *Railway Dugouts*. They are still referred to by the local people as such today.



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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had then been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians would be able to re-organize their defences.

However, the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day – perhaps ordered a little too precipitately - delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was a costly experience for the Canadians. Some attacks had not even gone in; those that *had*, had thus been largely unsupported and the troops had been cut to shreds. The Canadians had been left to count an extensive casualty list.



(Right above: *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*)

Ten days later the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported by a well-conceived artillery programme.

Thus the lost ground for the most part would be recovered, both sides would be back whence they had started eleven days before – and the cemeteries would be a little fuller.

(continued)

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



(Right below: *Hill 60* as it remains a century after the events of 1916-17 – in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014*)

**It was apparently during the first week of June of 1917 – on the opening day of the Battle of Messines Ridge – that a British mine detonated under its summit removed much of its resemblance to a hill.*

As for the PPCLI Battalion...*June 2nd, 1916.*

At 8.30 a.m. the enemy began shelling our front line and supports. This gradually increased to an intense bombardment from H.E. shells and trench mortars. The bombardment lasted for five hours when it was lifted and an infantry attack followed. The enemy succeeded in capturing the front line of our right company No.1. The garrison having been almost annihilated. Our left Company No. 2 succeeded in holding their trench and stopped an enemy bombing attack... Our casualties were heavy. (Excerpt from the PPCLI War Diary entry for June 2, 1916.)



The PPCLI Battalion was relieved on June 4 after having been submitted to almost constant artillery fire during the intervening period. The War Diarist on June 4, however, reported that on that day at least... *our casualties were not severe. At daybreak the 43rd Bn came up on our right and the 60th on our left but as it was too light the relief was postponed until evening... The Battalion...marched to the Asylum via the Lille Gate and were conveyed to “C” Camp by motor lorry...*

The PPCLI was to play no further role at *Mount Sorrel*. It had retired well to the rear, westward through Poperinghe and into France where it was to rest and re-enforce. Despite his report of...*casualties were not severe...*, during these days the Battalion War Diarist has recorded the unit as having welcomed more than five-hundred fifty newcomers, both officers and men - thus allowing the reader an idea of the *not severe* nature of the losses incurred during this episode*.

**It was also during this period, on June 14, that daylight-saving time was introduced into use by the Canadians, British and other Commonwealth Forces.*

The PPCLI Battalion was to remain in the rear area until June 26 when it had then been ordered forward to take over responsibility from the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion for the trenches in the area of *Sanctuary Wood*, the scene of heavy fighting only a few days before.

This was still to be an active area of mostly artillery duels but with at least one serious enemy attack – repulsed - to the sector just to the right of the PPCLI's 7th Brigade.

The level of intensity of those few days had soon, however, begun to diminish, and thus was to begin a summer period of that everyday grinding pattern of life in – and out of – the trenches.

In mid-August, the units of the 1st Canadian Division had begun to withdraw into France for some two weeks of training; they were in turn, two weeks later, to be followed by the battalions and other units of the 2nd Canadian Division.

During that summer, in contrast to the sectors in Belgium, relatively quiet during that period, it had been much less so elsewhere: the British, other Commonwealth troops and the French had undertaken an offensive in France, at *the Somme*. It had not been an overwhelming success, and the ensuing high casualty rate had necessitated the call to the Canadian Corps to supply re-enforcements to continue the venture.

On the night of August 21-22 was to come the turn of the PPCLI which, as would be the case with many of the retiring Canadian troops, had been relieved by battle-weary British units withdrawn from that ongoing confrontation to the south, *the Somme*. Its personnel had been transported from Ypres to the west by train and by the next day had arrived in the town of Poperinghe, there to indulge in the luxury of a bath.

The luxury was to be short-lived: the training area for the 3rd Canadian Division had been arranged for the area of Cassel, some twenty kilometres west again of Poperinghe. It was to there that the entire 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade had then marched on August 24 and it was there and also in proximity to the neighbouring community of Steenvoorde that it was to undergo drills and exercises until September 7.



(Right above: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing – and here now equipped with steel helmets and with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles**, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)

**The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it jammed, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*

By the summer of 1916 – and some the year before - the Canadian units were exchanging 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.

In fact the PPCLI Battalion had been the exception to the rule. In November of 1914, having become a unit of a British brigade, it had immediately been equipped with Lee-Enfields.

At the railway station at Esquebec at five-thirty in the afternoon of that September 7, the PPCLI Battalion had boarded a train destined for the community of Conteville, about one-hundred kilometres to the south. There the train would arrive at four o'clock on the following morning.

On September 13, six days later, the Battalion, having marched in stages from Conteville the sixty kilometres or so to the provincial town of Albert, had reported to the nearby *Brickfields Camp* where it was to bivouac for that night and at least a part of the next.

Then on the morning of September 15, having been ordered to *stand to* at six in the morning, it was to march towards the forward area, on the way equipping itself to attack at six o'clock that evening.

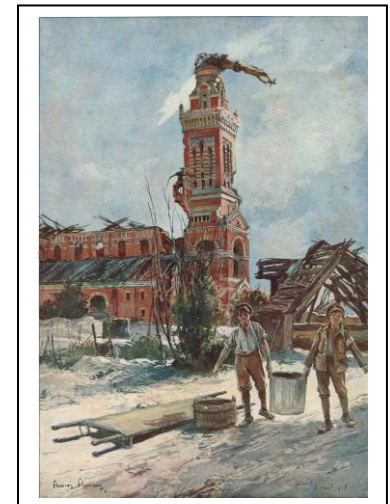
The *First Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for exactly eleven weeks. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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



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

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



Meanwhile, having moved towards the forward area on that morning of September 15, at two in the afternoon the Battalion had received orders to prepare to attack at six that evening. It then had apparently arrived in the area of the jumping-off trench – which for a while could not be found – *at exactly that hour and thus... marched in file through the Barrage & immediately launched the attack & reached its first objective the sunken road running south of Courcellette...* (Excerpt from the PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry of September 15, 1916)

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

(Right: *The fields surrounding it once again farm-land, this – seen from the north - is the reconstructed village of Courcelette one hundred years and several months after the Canadians attacked it in 1916. – photograph from 1917*)



(Right below: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

This first objective consolidated, the Battalion had pushed on and had finally attained its second objective by four o'clock on the afternoon of the next day. There the unit was to remain until its relief just before daybreak of the following day again, September 17. By that time the Battalion War Diarist was able to report... *All wounded were evacuated and all dead, as far as were known, buried... Total casualties just under 300.*

Withdrawn behind the lines for the next number of days, the PPCLI had provided working-parties and had received a draft of one-hundred forty re-enforcements before it had then set out on a six-day circuitous trek, likely in order to allow the thus evacuated billets in and near Albert to be occupied by the newly-arriving troops who were to be employed in imminent operations. The Battalion had marched back into *Brickfields* on September 28.



Then it was again billets in Albert and working-parties until October 2 when it would march into the support lines situated in the area of *Maricourt Wood*. There, two of the unit's companies had been posted to positions known as *Centre Way*, and the two others to *Piccadilly Circus*.

The PPCLI Battalion War Diary entries for October 3 and 4, 1916, read as follows:

3/10/16 The supports as described under 2/10/16. Intermittent heavy shelling. Very wet.

4/10/16 As for 2 and 3/10/16. The Battalion was relieved by the 8th Bn South Lancashire regiment at 4 pm and marched to bivouacs on TARA HILL.

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



The reprieve was short-lived: by the late afternoon of October 5, the PPCLI Battalion had then returned to the forward area to the west of the remnants of Courcelette and had been serving in support positions.

On October 8 a further offensive venture – less ambitious than that of the general attack of September 15 – had been ordered, on this occasion to be undertaken by both the 7th and 9th Canadian Infantry Brigades.

In the area of the villages of Le Sars and Courcelette, and onward towards Thiepval, the Germans had created a strong defensive system known as *Regina Trench*: the approaches to this position as well as the position itself were the objectives of the assault; the attackers from the 7th Brigade were to be the RCR Battalion and the 49th Battalion, with the PPCLI Battalion acting in support.

Excerpts from PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry for October 8, 1916: ...*The Patricias were in support... The first news was that the attack had been successful... Later news came that the wire had not been destroyed and that only parts of the objective had been entered... Then news came that the 9th Brigade had failed on our right... About 11, R.C.R.s were forced to abandon their hold on Regina Trench and retired to the jumping off trench... No's 1, 2 & 3 Coy's retired...*



There were apparently to be no further German counter-attacks, but while small Canadian parties were to make further limited advances, the main German positions had remained in the enemy's possession. The cost to the PPCLI, since it was operating in support, had not been as great as that to the RCR and 49th Battalions, yet it still had incurred *twelve killed in action, seventy-six wounded and two missing in action.*

(Right above: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on the night of November 10-11, 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

The PPCLI Battalion had been relieved later that evening and on the following afternoon, at four o'clock, had...*marched out of line to TARA HILL and bivouacked.*

On the next day again the unit had begun to march away from *the Somme.*

It was to be a long walk: westward before turning north to pass behind the city of Arras. The trek then had continued for a further ten kilometres to the area of Écoivres before having turned directly eastward.



The Battalion's final destination would be the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector*, directly to the north of Arras, some kilometres behind the forward area and from where a slope gently still rises to dominate the entire area: *la crête de Vimy – Vimy Ridge.*

(Right above: *From the summit of Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge, on which point stands the Canadian National Memorial, a grieving Canada overlooks the Douai Plain – photograph from 1915*)

By October 24-25 the unit had been back in the trenches. There it was once more to return to the way of life of the *Western Front* – perhaps, after *the Somme*, the average soldier had felt this not to be such a bad thing.

(continued)

During the period from that October of 1916 until February 11 of the following year, 1917, the PPCLI, when in the forward area, was serving in the *La Folie Sector* and, when in the rear area, was in the vicinity of Mont St-Éloi* or a little closer to the Front, at Neuville S-Vaast.



**Not to be confused with the Belgian village of St-Éloi where the 2nd Canadian Division, as seen on a previous page, had fought during the spring of 1916.*

(Right above and right: The village of Mont St-Éloi, near to which the 4th CMR Battalion was posted on occasion, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016)



It was also likely, as has been recorded on a previous page, at this time that Private White, on or about December 18, 1916, reported to duty with his new unit in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector.

* * * * *

For the personnel of the PPCLI Battalion the late autumn and then winter of 1916-1917 was to be once more one of the every-day grind of life in and out of the trenches. There would be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the 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.

Casualties were, overall, light; even while posted in the forward areas the War Diarists were often able to record...*Casualties – nil*. During this entire period the medical services were much more occupied with cases of sickness and the need for dental work than they were with the victims of military activity.



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

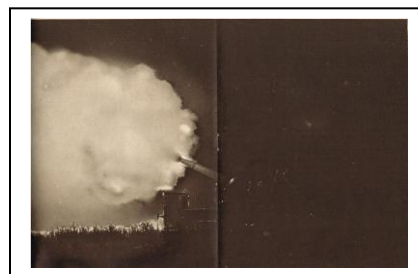
When the PPCLI Battalion was eventually ordered to be transferred from Le Mont St-Éloi in near-to-mid-February, it was to the area of the community of Bruay, some thirty kilometres to the north of Neuville St-Vaast and to a designated *Corps Rest Area*. To judge from the Battalion War Diary entries of that period, however, there appears to have been only a very minimum of rest involved.

(continued)

Parades, inspections, training – bayonet-fighting, bombing, musketry – sports (particularly football), lectures, route marches, medal presentations – with the occasional bath and concert added to the mix on occasion: this was the syllabus offered to Private White and his PPCLI Battalion until March 20.

Then to these preparations were to be added some novel developments: use of enemy weapons, when captured to be turned against him; the familiarization of each unit and of each man with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction in plaster of Paris of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and the 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.

On March 21 the PPCLI Battalion moved southwards to Villers-au-Bois, thence back into the trenches where the Battalion Headquarters were established in *Grange Tunnel* (see further below).



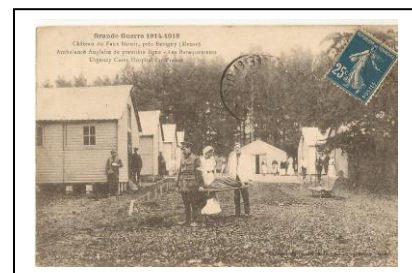
By this time it was evident that the Canadian artillery was preparing the ground for an attack, each day the barrage intensifying: by the last day of the month the War Diarist was reporting... *Another barrage – 10. A.M. A better one**.

(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece spews its flame into the middle of the night. – 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.*

The ground troops were now also being involved in numerous raids to harvest last-minute information *a propos* the enemy opposite, and messages were received from not only the Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, but also from Princess Patricia herself.

Private White was to be absent during a period of some forty-eight hours, from April 2 to 4, when he was sent to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance at nearby Fresnicourt. The complaint was ICT – Inflammation of the Connective Tissues – which, in the case of Private White, appears to have been slight.



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

(continued)

On April 6, two of the Battalion's four companies moved into *Grange Tunnel*, apparently to remain there until the day of the attack, a date of which they may not have been aware until April 8, for it was only then that the War Diarist recorded: *Orders received to attack & capture a portion of VIMY RIDGE...**

**Apparently at the Battalion level, the orders were relayed verbally to all company commanders, likely to ensure no interception by the Germans.*

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

On April 9 in that spring 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 *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 effort at Arras proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be a further disaster.

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade serving under 2nd Canadian Division command - stormed the slopes of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

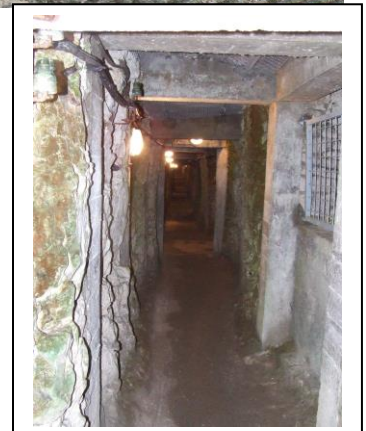
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3^d Division, burdened with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



The PPCLI Battalion was to be in the forefront of the operation. Excerpts from Operational Order No. 8:

The Battalion will attack from the OBSERVATION LINE on a two Company frontage: Nos.1 and 3 Coys capturing the Intermediate Objective (the junction of Blue Trench and Beggar Trench); Nos.2 and 4 Coys passing through and capturing the Final Objective (Britt Trench to Junction with Staubwesser Weg).

After reaching Final Objective, Nos.2 and 4 Coys will push patrols forward towards BOIS DU CHAMP POURRI...to ascertain whether these defences are occupied. Protective barrage will be lifted to enable this to be done...



...BATTALION H.Q...Will be in GRANGE SUBWAY...

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

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



Excerpts from Appendix C from the PPCLI Battalion War Diary for the month of April, 1917:

9th April, 1917

5.30 a.m. Artillery opened and leading wave commenced to climb up our lip of craters.

7.10 a.m. Message...received from...C.O. No.1 Co., stating had reached FAMINE TRENCH with few casualties...

8.30 a.m. Message...received from...O.C. No.4 Co., stating his Coy reached final objective at 7.40 a.m. with few casualties...

9.30 a.m. Message...received from...O.C. No.2 Co., stating his Coy in final objective...4 German Officers and 14 O.R. Taken prisoners. Casualties pretty strong. Enemy resistance weak...Patrol sent out...

Objectives having been reached, the troops consolidated: ammunition was brought up; telephone communications to the rear were established; wiring-parties were set to work. Having reached its objectives, for at least the time being, the PPCLI Battalion remained where it was.

(Right below: Canadians under shell-fire occupy the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge with anonymous dead in the fore-ground: the fighting of the next few days was fought under the same terrible conditions. – from Illustration)

In fact, it would have had problems going much further, not so much due to German resistance but because of the weather. *Vimy Ridge* was apparently not the much-vaunted, impregnable fortress that it has since been made into, although neither was it a walk-over, and the Germans attempts to re-take it were few in number and not very determined. They retreated to prepared positions in their third defensive line, some three kilometres distant.



The weather made sure that, even if the orders given had *not* been to consolidate, there could be no Canadian follow-up on the first successes: guns and transport could not be moved; supplies and man-power from the rear area were difficult to bring forward; casualties were sent to the rear also with difficulty; roads and tracks had disintegrated; and the construction of railways was slowed.

(continued)

(Right: *The railway advances in the wake of the troops on Vimy Ridge and, as it is built, supplies are brought forward and the wounded are evacuated. – from Illustration*)



Thus the promises of April 9 and 10 were not to be fulfilled and the campaign was to settle into the stagnancy and stalemate of previous battles – and of the one to follow.

Excerpts of a report written on the morning of April 10 and sent from the Battalion to the 7th Infantry Brigade - from Appendix 'A', PPCLI War Diary: *The Battalion reached Final Objective with about 35 to 40 casualties. Consolidation was at once proceeded with and by 11 a.m. the first and second lines had been made continuous with the exception of 50 yards in second line.*

During the afternoon...the enemy shelled both our lines...doing a great deal of damage to our trenches and causing many casualties. This shelling kept up till 2 a.m. today.

At the time of writing there are six machine guns in action but crews are short four men. One Stokes Gun is in front line but we need ammunition for it and crew.

Work is well under way and expect S.A.A. bombs, tools and salvage dumps will be completed today.

As for the casualty list, by half-past ten of that April 10, 1917, it – wounded and missing, all ranks - stood at two-hundred fifteen. Thirteen stretcher-cases had yet to be cleared and the dead, sixty-three in all, were yet to be buried*.



**This count was later revised downwards, to a total of two-hundred twenty-four of which, as before, sixty-three dead.*

(Right above: *In contrast to the hand-carts of the Somme, by the time of the Battle of Arras, 1917, the military railway networks were evolving at a torrid rate. Employed to bring the supplies of war to the forward areas, they were also used to ferry the some of the carnage of it to the medical facilities established in the rear. – from Illustration*)

By fifteen minutes past eight o'clock on that same evening, the PPCLI Battalion had been relieved and was on its way to the rear, in a snow-storm, to *Lamotte Camp*. As for Private White, what *exactly* his role had been during those two days, April 9 and 10, 1917, at *Vimy Ridge*, there appears, perhaps not surprisingly, to have been nothing documented.

The Battalion remained at *Lamotte Camp* for some five days until April 15, the War Diarist recording mainly the number of congratulatory message being sent the unit's way from hither and thither. On April 16, the Battalion then moved to *Gouy-Servins* for lectures and training where it remained for five further days before being ordered into the trenches back in the area of *Vimy Ridge*.

(continued)

The following period was to be one where the Canadians and British continued on the offensive against the enemy's position; sometimes the operation was successful, as at the so-called *Arleux Loop*, sometimes it was otherwise as later at Fresnoy. But in terms of casualties it was inevitably costly.

However, Private White's PPCLI Battalion, although in the forward lines, appears not to have been involved in any major confrontation at this time; thus its losses were to be accordingly light.

On the first day of May it was withdrawn to the area of Villers-au-Bois for training. A week afterwards it was moved the *La Targette Sector*, to positions on *Vimy Ridge* – now behind the lines – then to La Chaudière which a month before had been enemy-occupied territory, before completing the tour in billets in an area known as *Vimy Defences*. During this period, while there had been little infantry activity, the German artillery was still a force to be reckoned with – and would remain so – and a constant stream of fatalities and wounded were to result.



(Right above: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries.* – photograph from 2017)

The *Battle of Arras* officially closed on May 15 - it was already clear by then that there was to be no breakthrough. The French offensive it was intended to support, rather than having resulted in a major victory in the first forty-eight hours as had been anticipated by General Nivelle whose responsibility it was, was to sacrifice more than a quarter-million French soldiers – dead and wounded – and be the cause of a mutinous French Army.

From May 21 until the end of June, Private White's Battalion was stationed in the same locales: while out of the forward area, May 21 to June 7, at Villers-au-Bois, when in it, from June 7 until the last of the month, at La Targette and La Chaudière



(Right: *The Canadian National Memorial as seen from the vicinity of La Chaudière, from what was, on April 9, 1917, German-held ground* – photograph from 2016)

On July 1 there was to be a change of venue for the PPCLI Battalion as its four Companies relieved like units of the 85th and 72nd Battalions in front and support positions not far removed from Souchez, and its Transport and Headquarters were to operate from quarters in or near Carency.



Once again, infantry activity was to be at a minimum – a single small raid by the Germans on July 4 - while it was the enemy's guns, mortars and two mines which would cause the most damage and the majority of casualties.

(Preceding page: *The village of Souchez already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir*)

The entire PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry for July 8 reads as follows: *Very heavy thunderstorm in early morning. Rain at night. In evening our front line heavily shelled from direction of MERICOURT by 2 5.9 at a rate of 2 shells per minute. Several direct hits. No 4 Co 3 Killed 3 wounded.*

He is recorded as the son of Samuel White of St. John's, Newfoundland, but there appears to be available no further information *a propos* his natal family. He was also the husband of Annie, to whom as of October 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay and to whom, in a Will dated December 13 of that same 1916 he had bequeathed his all. There appears to be no record of any children.

Private Harry White was reported as having been *killed in action* while serving in the trenches on July 8, 1917. Originally buried in the area of Avion just south of Lens, since the location of this original grave remains recorded, it is likely that it was destroyed during later fighting.

Harry White had enlisted at the apparent age of thirty-eight years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland (from attestation papers only), June 10, 1877.

Private Harry White 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.