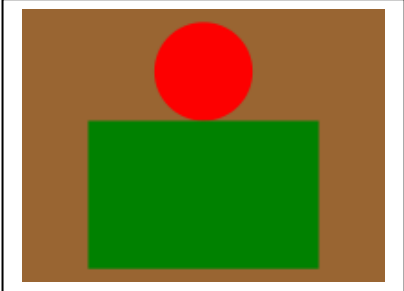




Private Thomas Whiteway (Number 761161) of the 54th Battalion (Kootenay), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois: Grave reference IX.A.5.

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 54th Battalion (Kootenay) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *wire-drawer*, Thomas Whiteway appears to have left little history behind him of his early days in the community of Job's Cove in Conception Bay, Newfoundland. However, it may be that he was the young man – his name abbreviated to *Thos Whiteway* - to be found on the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* on its crossing of April 11, 1909, of the Cabot Strait between Port aux Basques, Dominion of Newfoundland, and North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Thomas Whiteway was on his way to Hillsborough, New Brunswick.

However, this information requires confirmation, and all that may be said with any certainty is that the Thomas Whiteway of this dossier had arrived in Vancouver at some time before November 9, 1912, this being the date on which he was wedded in that city to a Miss Sarah Hutchings.

By the time of his enlistment, he and Sarah were residents of 1585, 38th Avenue East in the same city; but that is all the information to be found and the records of the time do not document whether the couple had any children.

His first pay records show that it was on March 16 of 1916 that the 11th Regiment, Irish Fusiliers of Canada, of the Canadian Militia began to compensate Private Whiteway for his services, this having been the day of his enlistment. That same date saw him undergo a military examination, a procedure which pronounced him as...*fit for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force*, as well as attestation, his oath having been witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

Five days later, on March 21, he was transferred from this militia unit to one of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions* and, on that same day, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by a Major Monk of the 121st Battalion (*Western Irish*) when he declared – on paper - on behalf of the Battalion's Commanding Officer that...*Thomas Whiteway...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this attestation.*

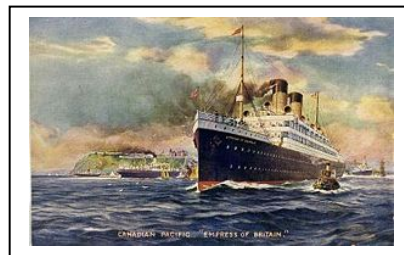
**The Canadian Militia was a force that had come into being to defend the county against invasion, particularly after 1871 when almost all British forces had been withdrawn back to Great Britain. As a defensive force, the Militia was prohibited by law to operate outside Canada's frontiers; thus, upon the Declaration of War on August 4, 1914, new battalions were to be authorized to serve overseas.*

This, however, did not preclude the Militia regiments from recruiting on behalf of these fledgling units nor did it prevent its personnel from volunteering – almost en masse – for service in them.

The 121st Overseas Battalion into which Private Whiteway had transferred on March 21 was based in the community of New Westminster where it was to mobilize, presumably in the local Armoury in the area of Queen's Park, during that winter of 1915-1916 and the early part of the spring that followed. Its recruits came mainly from Vancouver and the nearby communities of Surrey, Burnaby and from New Westminster itself.

In the month of May, 1916, it moved north-eastwards, to the tented *Camp Vernon* where it was to continue its training and to await the call to *overseas service*.

The call came in early August when the one-thousand sixty-five personnel of the 121st Battalion travelled the breadth of the country by train to the east-coast port of Halifax. There on August 14 Private Whiteway's unit boarded the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company passenger-liner *Empress of Britain*, by this time requisitioned as a troop-transport.



The vessel sailed later that same day.

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

The 121st Battalion was not to cross the Atlantic alone on board the *Empress*: also taking passage to the United Kingdom were the 117th, 120th and 126th Battalions of Canadian Infantry. Ten days after leaving Halifax, on August 24, the ship docked in Liverpool and the 121st Battalion was to be transported by train to the large Canadian military complex situated in the southern county of Hampshire in the vicinity of the two villages of Liphook and Bramshott, the latter having had its name adopted by the Canadian 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*)

It was to be a further four months before Private Whiteway would be despatched from Camp Bramshott to *active service**. In the meantime, on October 26, he had been prevailed upon to pen a Will, a document in which he bequeathed his everything to his wife.

**The 121st Battalion was never to see active service as a unit. The personnel not to be despatched to other units during the interim, as many were, would eventually all be absorbed into the 16th Canadian Reserve Battalion in early January of 1917.*

Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have sent overseas 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 those were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

It was on December 22 of that 1916 that Private Whiteway was *struck off strength* by the 121st Battalion, to be subsequently *taken on strength* by the 54th Battalion (*Kootenay*). On that night of December 22-23, he travelled across the English Channel to France, passing

through the English south-coast port of Southampton and its French counterpart, Le Havre, on the morning of the 23rd.

From there he likely *marched* to nearby *Rouelles Camp*, the Canadian Base Depot, where he and the other one-hundred sixty-one arrivals from England of that same December 23 reported to *duty*.

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



Both Christmas and the New Year were to be spent by Private Whiteway and his draft at the Base Depot. In fact it was apparently to be January 18 of the New Year, 1917, before he – one of a draft of forty *other ranks* - was ordered to join his new unit in the field.

According to his own papers, Private Whiteway joined his unit on January 21 – although the 54th Battalion War Diary does not make mention of any arrivals during this period. On the day before, the unit had marched sixteen kilometres from the forward area to the *Coupigny Huts* in the rear area where it was now to remain until January 26.

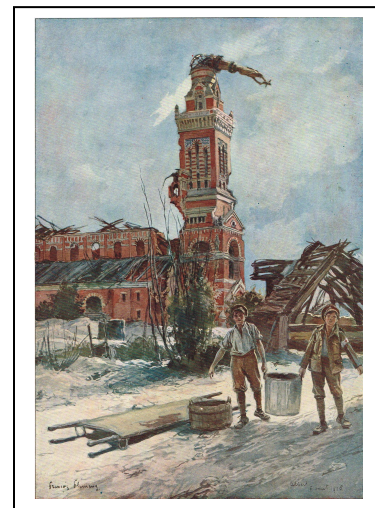
On that date it was to, in its turn, relieve the 87th Canadian Infantry Battalion in support positions in the picturesquely-named *Music Hall Line*. Private Whiteway was now to find out what *active service* was all about.

* * * * *

The 54th Battalion (*Kootenay*) was a component of the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 4th Division which had been serving on the Western Front since the middle of the month of August of 1916 when it had landed in France and immediately proceeded north into the *Kingdom of Belgium* to serve alongside the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions.

The baptism of fire on a large scale for the Canadian 4th Division was to soon come in the form of the *First Battle of the Somme*. Fought from July 1 of 1916 until the middle of that November, it was not until the end of August and the beginning of September that the Canadians had begun to play their part.

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



In the case of the 54th Battalion it was to be even later, not until October 10 that Private Whiteway's unit had arrived, from training in the north of France, at the *Brickfields Camp (la Briqueterie)* in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert, and four days later again before it was to find its way into the trenches at Courcelette.

(continued)

There had been little infantry action recorded during the last half of that October; yet even so, during the thirteen days which it would spend in the forward area, the Battalion had recorded thirty-two *killed in action* and one-hundred forty-eight *wounded*, due mostly to enemy gun-fire.

That routine of trench-life had continued for the 54th Battalion, still with little infantry action, even on the night of November 10-11 when other Canadian units had finally captured the nearby German position known as *Regina Trench*.

It was perhaps a bit ironical that it was not to be until *after* the official end to *First Somme* – this declared after the capture of the village of *Beaumont** by the 51st Highland Division on November 15 – that Private Whiteway's unit was to undertake its most important operation of the entire campaign, a raid on November 18 on the so-called *Desire Support Trench*. According to the War Diarist it had apparently been successful, having produced a number of prisoners while also having gained the control of several enemy positions as well as the above-mentioned trench.

Battalion casualties – all ranks - incurred during the assault had been: forty-four *killed in action*, one-hundred seventy-one *wounded* and twenty-three *missing in action*.

**This village a part of what at the time was – and still is (in 2018) - the Commune of Beaumont-Hamel*



(Right above: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

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



The 54th Battalion had remained at *the Somme* until November 25 when it was to turn its back on the place. At first westward, then northward, having passed to the western side of the city of Arras and beyond to the north-west, on December 4 it had reached the commune of Ourton. By then the unit had spent some ten days on foot to cover the eighty-kilometre itinerary.

(Right: *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*)



It had then been in this area, and in the forward sectors of the vicinity of the city and mining centre of Lens, some twenty or so kilometres to the east of Ourton, that the Battalion was to operate for the winter months, submitting to all those rigours, routines – and perils - of life in the trenches*.

(continued)

****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 the forward area, the latter 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)

During those final days of the autumn of 1916 and the winter months which followed, there was to 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 served to keep 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 to be, overall, light; even while posted in the forward areas the Canadian War Diarists had often been able to record...*Casualties – nil*. During this entire period the medical services had been much more occupied with cases of sickness and the need for dental work than they had been with the victims of military activity.



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

It had been also, of course, during this somewhat languid period, that Private Whiteway and his draft had reported to the 54th Battalion at the *Coupigny Huts*. It was to be a literally-cold welcome: during that winter of 1916-1917 there were to be many shortages, among them fuel for heating. The 54th Battalion War Diarist has described those huts as...*large and cold – very cold*.

* * * * *

The beginning of March was then distinguished with a raid by units of the 4th Canadian Division in which the 54th Battalion was to lose heavily: eighty-three *killed in action or died of wounds* and one-hundred thirty-three *wounded*.

(continued)

Much of the remainder of that month would then be dedicated to rest and training until the 25th when the Battalion was ordered moved forward again. It was then to spend the next ten days in trenches in front of German positions on a long crest of land dominating the surrounding area: *Vimy Ridge*.

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



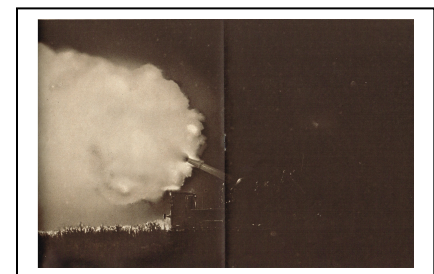
During that time in mid-March of rest and training – with apparently little of the former in evidence – Private Whiteway's Battalion was to be busy. Parades, inspections, training – bayonet-fighting, bombing, musketry – sports (particularly football), lectures, route marches, medal presentations – with the occasional bath and concert added to the mix on occasion: this was the syllabus offered to the Battalion.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

To these preparations were to be added some novel developments: use of enemy weapons; the familiarization of each unit and of each man with his role during the upcoming battle; 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.

After ten days the unit was then ordered moved once again, on April 4, for final preparation and organization, before finally being ordered up into assembly trenches on the evening of April 8.



As these final days had passed, the artillery barrage had grown 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 well 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 constantly busy overhead.

(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration*)

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

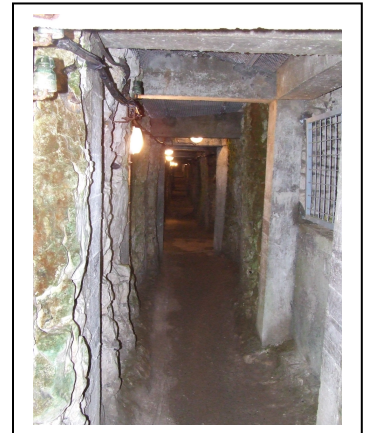
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the Great War for the British, one of the few positive episodes to be the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



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

While the British-led campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet another 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 operating under 2nd Canadian Division command - stormed the slopes of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared them almost entirely of its German occupants*. They had then begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the habitual German counter-attacks – which in fact were never to amount to much.



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

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



**It was the battalions of the Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions which were to attack the Ridge itself; the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions had the responsibility of clearing the slope to the south, including the village of Thélus. One Canadian and two British brigades – also under Canadian command - were held in reserve.*

There had been, on those two days, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the first days' success proved logistically impossible*. Thus the Germans had closed the breach and the conflict was once more to revert to one of inertia.

****Not only had the weather over that entire period nullified any semblance of mobility, but the attackers, having reached their objectives, had been ordered not to continue to advance, but to halt and to consolidate.***

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



As for Private Whiteway's 54th Battalion on that April 9, 1917, it was to operate at well below establishment strength: the War Diarist had recorded that...Weather, snow & rainstorms. 5.30 am. Bn attacked. 350 all ranks in four waves behind 102nd Bn... Distance about 500 yards. Objectives BEER and BLUE trenches... Strenuous opposition encountered on our own left flank from enemy strong point at OLD BOOT SAP & slight opposition from strong point near BROADMARSH CRATER. All objectives were reached and communication with 42nd Bn established.

Left flank unsupported owing to 75th Bn failing to reach their objectives. Persistent sniping from points in rear of our position combined with the enemy trying to work round our left flank necessitated a withdrawal...to Batter Trench which the 54th Battalion thereupon consolidated and where it apparently then remained.

On that April 9, 1917, the 54th Battalion was to report totals of twenty-four killed in action, one-hundred five wounded in action and one-hundred missing in action. One of that number was Private Whiteway.

The son of William Whiteway, fisherman, and of Rosanna Whiteway (née Reed) of Job's Cove, Conception Bay, Newfoundland – the couple married January 12, 1889 - he was also brother to perhaps a single sibling, David.

He was also, of course, husband to Sarah (née Hutchings) to whom he had willed his all and also to whom, as of August 1, 1916, he was to allocate a monthly twenty dollars from his pay.

Private Whiteway was reported as having been killed in action on April 9, 1917, during the attack on Vimy Ridge.

Thomas Whiteway had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-three years and eight months: date of birth at Job's Cove (from attestation papers and from the original Newfoundland Birth Register), August 18, 1892.

Private Thomas Whiteway 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.