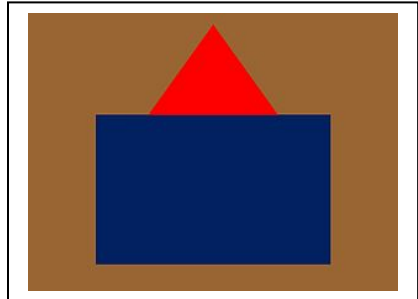




Private William Yarn (Number 877261) of the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Tyne Cot British Cemetery: Grave reference I.B.18..

(Right: The image of the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *brewer*, William Yarn has left few details behind him of his early years in the Newfoundland fishing community of Rose Blanche on the Island's south Coast.

The information *a propos* his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia is somewhat tenuous and perhaps incomplete. He may well have been the young man documented on the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* who was travelling from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on October 6, 1908, with his mother and younger sister Lavinia – but this needs corroboration.

Although the 1911 Canadian Census records the parents and two older offspring as not having emigrated until 1909, his brothers born in 1902 and 1904 are documented as having been born in Nova Scotia, and a further passenger list documents his father as having crossed at least as early as 1904. A passenger list from the year 1908 records Mrs. Yarn, William and his sister Lavinia(?) as '*Returning Canadians*'.

After having travelled from Newfoundland, the family settled in the community of North Sydney and there were residents of Columbia Street. However, this flurry of information ends with the 1911 Census and it is not until the year of 1916 that William Yarn's story comes to life again.

His first pay records indicate that it was on March 9 of 1916, and in North Sydney, that the Canadian Army\* began to remunerate Private Yarn for his services and that this was also the date on which he was *taken on strength* by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*). Only a single day was then to pass before he was attested on March 10, his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace, this also having been the day on which he underwent a medical examination, a procedure which was to pronounce him as...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*.

*\*Curiously, perhaps, the term 'Canadian Army', despite apparent frequent usage, was not to become official until the year 1940.*

After these initial undertakings, it is almost certain that Private Yarn was then ordered to report *to duty* for training to the not-distant town of Broughton to the south of Sydney, an almost *ghost* community which had recently been transformed into a military camp\*.

*\*Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent on it as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

April 26 of 1916 was then to be the moment on which the formalities of his enlistment were officially brought to a conclusion, likely at Broughton. On that date the commanding officer of the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, declared – on paper – that...*877261 Pte. William Yarn...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

(continued)



Private Yarn's posting to Broughton was to last altogether a little more than ten weeks. By that time, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* to comprise the 185<sup>th</sup>, the 85<sup>th</sup>, the 193<sup>rd</sup> and the 219<sup>th</sup> Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at *Camp Aldershot* in Kings County, Nova Scotia, where the *Brigade* then spent all of that summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks prior to its departure for *overseas service*.

At seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of Private Yarn's 185<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. Earlier that day the 85<sup>th</sup> and the 188<sup>th</sup> Battalions had gone on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219<sup>th</sup> and the 193<sup>rd</sup>.

(Right below: *Sister-ship to Britannic – that vessel to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean a month later, in November of 1916 – and also to the ill-fated Titanic, HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor in the company of HM Hospital Ship Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay, Island of Lemnos, in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

On October 13<sup>th</sup> - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166<sup>th</sup> – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit to march up the gangways before *Olympic* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. For the trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.



The vessel arrived in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18, some five days later, and the troops disembarked on the following day again. Private Yarn's 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards by train to *Witley Camp* in the southern extremes of the English county of Surrey.

The 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) is documented as then having provided re-enforcements for Canadian forces already on the Continent. This role was to last until February of 1918, sixteen months later, when the remainder of the unit would be absorbed into the newly-organized Canadian 17<sup>th</sup> (*Reserve*) Battalion.

The Battalion's organizers had originally anticipated that the *Cape Breton Highlanders* would be sent – with the other three units of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* – into *active service* on the Continent, but this was not to be\*. Only the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion would ever eventually proceed to serve in the trenches of the *Western Front*.

*\*Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched 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.*

(continued)

**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 these were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been specifically designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.**

**By the time of Private Yarn's arrival in England, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for two months during which time it had suffered horrific losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that three-quarters of the newly-arrived *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* were to be deployed.**



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

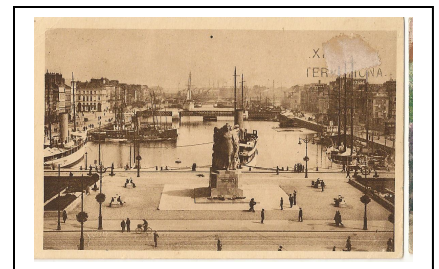
**Private Yarn was now to remain in the United Kingdom for well over seven months, the much greater part of this time having undoubtedly been spent undergoing further training.**

**Private Yarn is documented as having made the crossing of the English Channel to France on the night of May 27-28, 1917, having been *struck off strength* by the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion on that former date. He then likely travelled through the south-coast English port of Southampton and the French industrial port-city of Le Havre, located at the estuary of the River Seine.**

**On that second date he made his way to report *to duty* to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Base\* Depot, it by that time having been re-established in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étapes where he was to be *taken on strength* by the 25<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*)\*\*.**

**\*Each Canadian Division had a Depot under the new system and thus the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> CIDB (see further below).**

**\*\*It was not until May 29 that nine-hundred fifty-four arrivals from England were recorded as having reported to the Base Depot – none on the day before.**



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

**It is unclear on what date Private Yarn was then eventually despatched from Étapes to join his unit *in the field* but his personal file documents that he arrived to report, not to the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion, but to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Entrenching Battalion for a temporary posting. He was to remain in this unit's service for just under ten weeks.**

**(continued)**

Private Yarn's 2<sup>nd</sup> Entrenching Battalion at the time of his arrival was stationed in the area of the community of Hersin, some twenty-five kilometres to the north-west of Arras. Posted to the rear, yet within marching distance from the forward area, Hersin was the base from where the working-parties of the Battalion would be despatched, often on a daily basis, to work on the trench systems to the east and close to the Front, and on the communications systems – roads, railways, water lines – in and about the remainder of the area\*.

*\*These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks. They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However, they also came to serve as re-enforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.*



(Right above: *Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this also being a job to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

The day of Private Yarn's arrival – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Entrenching Battalion War Diary cites it being on June 16, not the 15<sup>th</sup> as in Private Yarn's personal papers – was to be a busy one: two-hundred forty-one re-enforcements eventually destined to serve in five-different front-line battalions were to report from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Base Depot on that day.

Private Yarn and his comrades-in-arms were now to spend the following weeks undertaking - apart from those cited above – a number of other tasks as well: loading and unloading trains at a nearby saw-mill; burying cables; delivering building materials; and when no work was in the offing the troops underwent infantry training.

The details of Private Yarn's eventual transfer to the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion appear to be somewhat incomplete and perhaps also contradictory. According to the Entrenching Battalion's journal, two small drafts, on August 10 and 28, were apparently despatched to the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion, yet the arrival of neither appearing in the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion's War Diary entries for that month.

His own dossier records Private Yarn as having reported *to duty* with the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) on August 21; nevertheless, his pay records of the time show that he had commenced being remunerated through the offices of that battalion in July of 1917, the month before.

Whatever the case, it was surely before the end of that August, 1917, that he was with his battalion as, by that time, the unit was in dire need of re-enforcement. Having been involved in infantry actions on several occasions during that month (see below), the *trench strength* of the unit was reported as just fifteen officers and three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks*, some forty per cent of establishment battalion strength.

\* \* \* \* \*

(continued)



The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some twenty-three months by the time of Private Yarn's arrival, since mid-September of the year, 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front*.



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



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

Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart on the coast opposite, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. These had been in the areas forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel - in that very small part of the country which had not by then been occupied by the Germans - and to the south of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



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

(Right: *A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres evident as early as 1915 – the city is described as 'morte' (dead) – and two years prior to the arrival of Private Yarn on the Continent – from Illustration*)



The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion would remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916.

In early April of 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It had been at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the British had detonated a series of mines beneath the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and to consolidate the newly-won territory.

(continued)

However, it was not just a resolute German defence but the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire which was to face the newcomers who were to take over from the by-then exhausted British on during the first days of April. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

(Right: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)



Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had relieved another Canadian unit in craters and new trenches, and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had incurred on any single occasion up until that date.

The next large-scale infantry confrontation between the Canadian forces – by that time designated as the *Canadian Corps* - and the German Army, came about in the south-eastern area of the *Ypres Salient* where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had been posted. The situation, however, would soon rapidly deteriorate to a point serious enough so that units other than those of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division were to be ordered forward into the fray.



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

(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 been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians would be able to re-organize their defences. But the precipitately-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piecemeal and poorly co-ordinated, was to prove a costly experience for the Canadians.



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

(continued)



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

The infantry confrontation had continued until June 13, the final action having been a now well-supported Canadian attack in the first hours of that morning. The Germans had retreated and by the end of the affair, both sides – apart from a small German gain at *Hooge* – were to find themselves back much where they had started: from that point of view the affair was to end *status quo*, but of course the cemeteries had been more numerous and that much more full.



**(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. In the first week of June, 1917, a British mine detonated under its summit was to remove much of any similarity to a hill. – photograph from 2014*)**



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

As already stated, it was the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division which had been the main recipient of the enemy's full offensive thrust, but the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had apparently played a role sufficiently important to warrant the name *Mount Sorrel* becoming the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.



From the middle of June up until August of 1916, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.

Some two weeks later, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the unit had been withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moulle.

The following week at Moulle would be spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifle which was to replace the Canadian-made Ross Rifle\*, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.

**(Right: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph to be found on another page – and here equipped 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 would jam, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*

*By the summer of 1916 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.*

By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short 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 Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)



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

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

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



Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.



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

On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

Excerpt from the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916: *5<sup>th</sup> Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcelette... the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

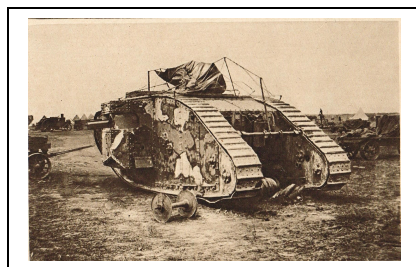
(Right: Seen from the north, the village of Courcelette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017)



Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who had gone over *the top* on the day of the assault, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action*\*.

*\*It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

(Right: One of the tanks employed during the First Battle of the Somme, here withdrawn from the field and standing in one of the parks where these machines were overhauled and maintained – from *Le Miroir*)



*\*Some of the first tanks ever to be used in battle had apparently been a positive element during the fighting of the day on the Canadians' Front.*

On October 1 the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as *KENORA* and *REGINA*... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies...were to proceed over *KENORA* up to *REGINA*, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men... Excerpt from the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for October 1, 1916

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



The attack had been a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right above: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)





On the night of October 1-2 the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and had made its way westwards and then northwards. It was to subsequently pass to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the coal-mining centre of Lens. There the unit would remain for the following six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay.

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



(Right below: *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*)



That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare\*; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a welcome respite.

There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides.

The medical facilities during this period were to be kept much more busy by cases of sickness and dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.



(Right: *A detachment of Canadian troops moving up to forward positions during the winter of 1916-1917 – 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 nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



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

(continued)



**(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in their support positions somewhere on the Somme during the autumn of the year 1916 - By that time they had been equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)**

**Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, where it was to undergo intensive training which was to be the eventual lot of most, if not all, of the battalions of the Canadian Corps before the upcoming British offensive: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts...**

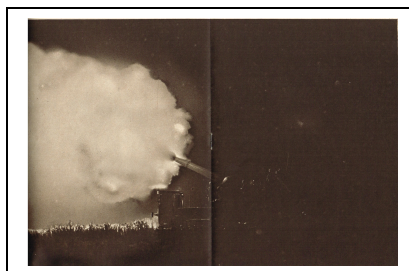
**...and at Vimy Ridge and elsewhere, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the presence of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.**

**(Right: Canadian Machine-gunners in training with their new Vickers weapons during the period in 1917 before the Battle of Arras – from Le Miroir)**



**During the final days, from April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked: then, in only two days' time, all that training was now to become the real thing.**

**As the days had passed the artillery barrage was to grow progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion had described it as...drums. By this time, of course, the Germans would have become aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had thrown retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been extremely busy\*.**



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

**\*It must be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – 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 to happen.**

**On April 8... Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route... (Excerpt from 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary). But it apparently was not to pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.**

On April 9, Easter Monday, in that spring of 1917, the British Army had launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be 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 entire *Great War* for the British, one of the very few positive episodes having been the assault by the Canadian Corps of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the advance.

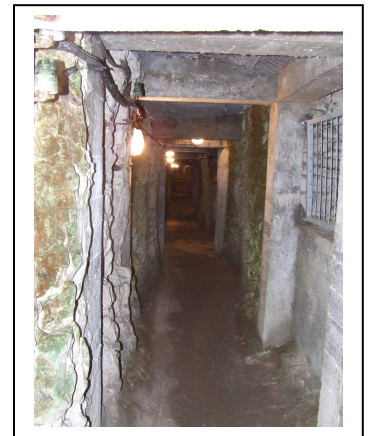


The British campaign would prove an overall disappointment, but that French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood atop Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

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

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



(Right below: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had not been responsible for the taking of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but for the clearing of the community of *Thélus*, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack.



The Battalion's objectives of April 9 had apparently soon been captured and much of the remainder of the day had been spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

(Right below: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge, anonymous dead lying in the foreground: The fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions.* – from *Illustration*)



(continued)

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

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

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, but highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – however, such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift movement of guns and material – and in any case, the orders had been...*to consolidate*.



Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* to be fought in the manner of the first two days and, by the end of those five weeks, little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success. By the time that the *Battle of Arras* had officially drawn to its conclusion, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn into reserve, to rest and to train – if that is not a contradiction – in the vicinity of the community of Gouy-Servins, to the west of the city of Lens.

Now there were to be several weeks before a return to the forward area. Excerpts from 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War diaries of July 2 and 3, 1917: *Battalion at BOUVIGNY HUTS. Preparations to relieve 46<sup>th</sup> British Division, 138<sup>th</sup>. and 137<sup>th</sup>. British Brigades, 1/5 Battalion Leicesters and 1/4 Battalion Leicesters. Casualties, 1 Other Rank killed, 9 Other Ranks wounded.*

*Relief completed about 2 a.m.* – No further casualties were to be documented for the remainder of the day.

Thus it had been back to business as usual.

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





The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort and one of the primary objectives of the campaign was to be *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the city of Lens; it was to be the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions to which would be confided the responsibility for its capture.

(Previous page: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

On August 14 the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had moved forward to the northern outskirts of the city and mining-centre of Lens and then on the morrow had fought to take and retain what is a seemingly-innocuous piece of territory.

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



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

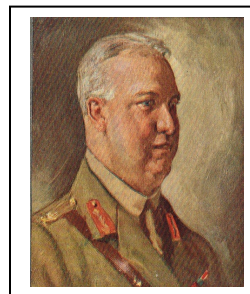
(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)



Yet *Hill 70* had been high enough to have been considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – as the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)

Objectives had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16<sup>th</sup> several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.



These defences had held firm and the Canadian artillery, by then employing newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* had remained in Canadian hands.

(Right: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)



Of course, the Germans had not been the only ones to have incurred casualties: by the time that the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to retire on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*, fifty of which were apparently incurred on that August 17.



(Right: *The spoils of war: Canadian officers and men on some of the terrain on which they had recently fought – and captured – from Le Miroir*)

While it may have retired temporarily into support from front-line positions on August 17, the respite was to last not even a day – and the unit had incurred casualties even while withdrawing into those support positions. On August 18 the Battalion's War Diarist was to report a unit *trench strength* of just fifteen officers and three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks* due to the heavy casualty numbers as seen further above.

On the night of August 20-21, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had relieved the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the front line, still in the area of the Cité St-Laurent\*. Relieved in their turn on the night of August 21-22, the depleted ranks of the unit had retired on foot and by bus to the afore-mentioned community of Gouy-Servins. To the casualty count of August 17, a further seventy could now be added.

*\*The many pit-heads and their neighbourhoods surrounding the mining-centre and city of Lens were often designated by the term Cité followed by the name of a saint.*

After the weeks of relatively little infantry activity during the early days of that summer of 1917, the attack on August 15 in the area of *Hill 70* and the city of Lens had apparently been intended as the precursor to further weeks of an entire campaign to be spear-headed by the Canadian Corps.

However, the British offensive of that summer, further to the north in Belgium, had been proceeding less well than had been presumed and the Canadians, the Australians and the New Zealanders were to be needed *there*. Offensive activities in the *Lens Sector* had been suspended in early September and thus for a short period the 25<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion was to revert to those rigours and routines, the everyday grind, of existence in – and out of - the trenches.

It was likely about this time (also see further above) – there was a draft that arrived on the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month, a day on which the unit was *out of* the trenches and, having just arrived at its billets at Camblain l'Abbé, was preparing for a few short days of training – that Private Yarn reported to the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*).

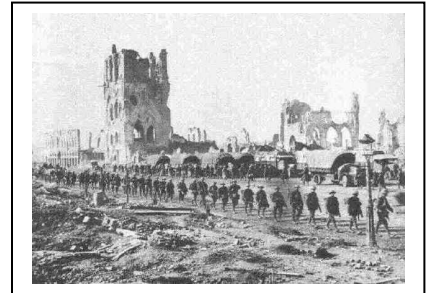


(Right: *The village of Camblain l'Abbé almost exactly a century after Private Yarn was billeted there in 1917 – photograph from 2017*)

\* \* \* \* \*

It was not to be until the final weeks of the month of October that the Canadians were to become embroiled in the British summer – and then autumn - offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history simply as *Passchendaele*, having adopted that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – *ostensibly* - one of the British High Command's objectives.

(Right: *Troops file from the railway station through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres and past the historic Cloth Hall on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the by-then non-existent Passchendaele village itself.



The strength of the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion on that November 5 was to be reported as twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-six other ranks, perhaps some sixty per cent of establishment unit numbers.

(Right: *The Canadian Memorial standing on Passchendaele Ridge, at the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village – photograph from 2015*)



During the three days that the unit was to spend at the front at this time, the casualties sustained by the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion were, by comparison to those incurred by other units, fairly light: seventeen *killed in action*, sixty-seven *wounded* and six *missing in action*.

During the late evening of November 8 the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered withdrawn from the area of the front line and eventually moved to the west of Ypres itself, to the area of the village of Vlamertinghe. On November 13 it retired back across the frontier into France and south to the area of Neuville St-Vaast, adjacent to *Vimy Ridge*.



(continued)



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

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

(Right below: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

By November 8, however, Private Yarn was no longer to be serving with the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He had played his role to its conclusion.

Excerpt from the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for November 11, 1918: The relief of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion...*was complete by 1.06 a.m. Nov. 8<sup>th</sup>.... Enemy shelled supports very heavily, and also in front and in rear of Front Line, but not knowing exact position of Front Line, his shelling did not do a great deal of damage. "C" Company in support suffered heavily. Line taken over was simply a series of disconnected posts in shell holes, but men worked steadily and by night the whole line was pretty well connected up. Battalion was relieved by 18<sup>th</sup> Bn... relief being complete by 9.03 p.m.*

*Casualties for total trip – 17 killed, 67 wounded and 6 missing. The trip had lasted from November 5 to 8.*

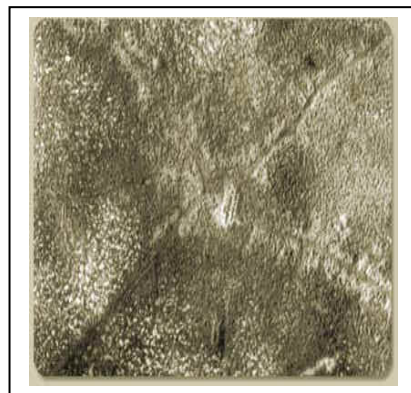
The oldest child of Samuel Yarn, fisherman and seaman, and of Elizabeth (known to some as *Lizzie*) Yarn (née *Spicer*) of Rose Blanche, Newfoundland\*, to whom he had willed his all on August 23, 1916, and to whom he had also, as of October 1 of the same year, allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay, he was also brother to Levania (sic), James, George and to Erban (sic).

*\*The couple married October 10, 1894.*

Private Yarn was reported at first as having been *wounded* then as having been *killed in action* (possibly hit twice) on November 8, 1917.

William Yarn had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years: date of birth in Rose Blanche, Newfoundland, June 5, 1896 (from attestation papers and the Newfoundland Birth Registry).

Private William Yarn was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



**The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 23, 2023.**