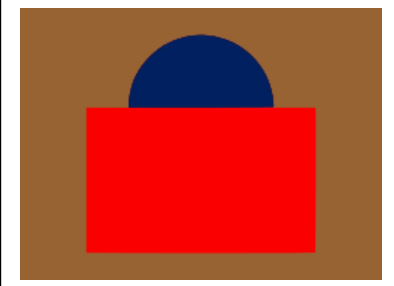




Private Edward Fagan (Number 1054731) of the 14th Battalion Regiment (*Royal Montreal Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Nœux-les-Mines Communal Cemetery: Grave reference II.G.29.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) is from the Wikipedia web-site*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *labourer*, Edward Fagan appears to have left behind him little information a propos his early years spent in the area of the communities of Foxtrap and Kelligrews, Newfoundland, or his subsequent movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the city of Montréal in the Canadian province of Québec. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was a resident there, of 355, Hibernia Road*, in December of 1916, for that is where and when he enlisted.

**This address appears on more than one soldier's records – Batten, also of Foxtrap, for one - but the reason for this is not very clear – relatives?*

All the given sources agree that it was on December 28 that Edward Fagan presented himself for enlistment, for a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force* – and also for attestation.

At the end of what must have been a busy day for the by-then Private Fagan, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion when the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel E.M. McRobie, of the 244th Battalion (*Kitchener's Own*) to which he had been attached, declared – on paper – that...*Edward FAGAN...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The 244th Battalion may well have trained, at least partially, at the Westmount Armoury in the city as the unit appears to have been affiliated to the 23rd Battalion (later 23rd (Reserve) Battalion) and also to the 14th Battalion, both of which were based at the Armoury. Private Fagan was to serve with both of these battalions (see below). Then again, the Peel Street Armoury is also suggested on the papers of another soldier in the same unit.

If he *did* train at Westmount, it was not to be for very long. Towards the end of the month of March, 1917, the 244th Battalion was transported by railway to the east-coast port of Halifax. There on March 25 it embarked onto the *SS Lapland** for passage to the United Kingdom.

**The ship was not to be requisitioned as a troop carrier until June of that same year; during the first three years of the conflict she had been serving the commercial New-York to Liverpool route as she apparently was at the time that Private Fagan boarded her.*

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



Private Fagan's unit was not to sail alone: taking ship on this occasion were also the 149th and the 186th Canadian Infantry Battalions for a total of close to three-thousand military personnel passengers.

Lapland having sailed on March 28, the voyage then appears to have been uneventful – until the last day.

(continued)

It would seem that when steaming through Liverpool Bay on the last leg of her journey, the ship struck a mine presumably laid by a German submarine. She reached port, however, and there was no loss of life, but the incident likely gave Private Fagan a few anxious moments.

Upon its arrival in England on April 7 the unit was transported by train to the Canadian military complex at Shoreham-on-Sea on the south coast of the country, there for the entire 244th Battalion to be transferred to the newly-formed – in early January of 1917 - 22nd (Reserve) Battalion.

Seventeen days afterwards, the 22nd (Reserve) Battalion was now itself to be absorbed by the 23rd (Reserve) Battalion also recently-formed and also based at *Shoreham Camp**. Private Fagan, however, was not to be attached for long to this reserve unit: only thirty-three days, to be exact.

**In practice this apparently transpired on April 24, although officially it appears not to have been done bureaucratically until May 9-11.*

Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas just over 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 aspirations of seeing active service in a theatre of war.

However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front.

By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

On May 27 Private Fagan was posted – on paper – to the 14th Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) already serving on the Continent. He sailed on the same day – likely through nearby the south-coast port of Southampton and the French industrial port-city of Le Havre. On the following morning he reported *to duty* at Rouelles Camp, the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of Le Havre, one of nine-hundred forty-eight re-enforcements to do so on that day.

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

The purpose of the Base Depot was to organize and train arrivals from the United Kingdom and those returning from medical facilities on the Continent before despatching them to the units to which they had been attached. In some cases these units were not in a position at the time to accept any new additions, in which case these remained at the Depot until a more propitious moment*.



****In fact, at this time the Canadian Base Depot was in the throes of moving its infantry facilities into four new Depots in the area of the town of Étaples, further north up the coast. Private Fagan and seventeen-hundred and seventy-eight other officers and men were sent to the 1st (Divisional) Canadian Infantry Base Depot on May 30.***

From the new 1st Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étaples, Private Fagan – one of two-hundred other ranks to be despatched to various units on that day - was forwarded on June 2 to the 1st Entrenching Battalion*. It was a detachment of eleven other ranks which arrived to report to the unit in the rear area of Villers-au-Bois later that same day.

(Right: Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, was used primarily by medical facilities in the area during the years 1916-1918. Today within its bounds lie over twelve-hundred Commonwealth dead – the majority Canadian – and also thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017)



****The entrenching battalions, 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: Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this being one of the tasks to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned – from Le Miroir or Illustration)



The posting to the 1st Entrenching Battalion was not of a long duration, perhaps as little as ten days. Documented as having joined the 14th Battalion on June 18, at the latest he would have left the Entrenching Battalion on June 12 among a recorded draft of one-hundred forty-four other ranks, one-hundred of them (see below) reporting to duty at not-far-distant Mont St-Éloi on that June 18.



The Battalion War Diary for that June 18, 1917, reads as follows: *Fine and warm. The 14th Canadian Battalion is in huts in Divisional Reserve a few hundred yards from MONT ST ELOY*. The day was spent in cleaning up and holding kit inspection. Casualties nil. Reinforcements, 100 other ranks.***



****Not to be confused with St. Eloy (St-Éloi) in southern Belgium where Canadian forces also served (see below), Mont St-Éloi is to be found to the north-west of the city of Arras in northern France and was, at the time, well behind the lines.***

(continued)

(Previous page (both): *The village of Mont St-Éloi at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbé St-Éloi – destroyed in 1793 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)

*****This, of course, leaves forty-four personnel unaccounted for. It also begs the question of to where the draft of June 12 disappeared after having left the entrenching battalion: Mont St-Éloi is at the most five kilometres distant. Neither the War Diary of the 1st Entrenching Battalion nor that of the 14th Battalion provides the answer.***

* * * * *

The 14th Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) had by that time been serving on the Continent since February of 1915 as an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (1st) Canadian Division*. After its arrival from Canada via England, it had at first served in northern France in the *Fleurbaix Sector* just south of Armentières, before having been ordered into the *Ypres Salient* in April of that same 1915.

**Before the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division it was often simply designated, logically enough, as the Canadian Division.*

(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - showing the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)



Only a bare two months after its arrival on the Continent, and only days after it had moved into a north-eastern sector of the *Salient**, the Canadian Division had distinguished itself during the *Second Battle of Ypres* in the spring of 1915.

**In fact, certain units were still not in position on the day of the first German attacks.*

(Right: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier - just to the south of the village of Langemark, stands where the Canadians withstood the German attack at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



On April 22 of that year 1915, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the Germans had released chlorine gas in front of French colonial troops at the northern end of the *Ypres Salient*. The gas had then reportedly caused some six-thousand casualties in a very short space of time and had provoked a rout of the stricken defenders.



The Canadians, in the line just to the right, not having been affected to the same degree, had been ordered to fill the void left by the retreating French troops and to forestall a German break-through.

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

For its part, the 14th Battalion was to be called into action on April 22, the first day of the German attack, and had thereupon taken up defensive positions to the north-east of the city in the vicinity of Wieltje*.

**Up until this date the Battalion War Diary had been a neat, detailed, type-written journal; as of April 22 it is a hastily-scribbled effort scratched in pencil, promising that the details will be appended at a later date. But, if nothing else, it shows the desperate situation of the next few days.*

Companies of the 14th Battalion then had made a stand with the 13th Battalion at St-Julien (*Sin-Juliaan*) for the next two days before having been obliged to retire by the force of the German artillery activity. On several more occasions on the following days the Battalion – and the Canadians in general, with some British forces – were to retire to a series of reserve trenches.

(Right: *Troops, in this case the Liverpool Regiment, in 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 spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

However, as history has recorded, the front had eventually been consolidated and the 14th Battalion was to be able to retire on the night of May 4-5 – a second document in the same source has 3-4. Only two weeks later it was to be in action once again.

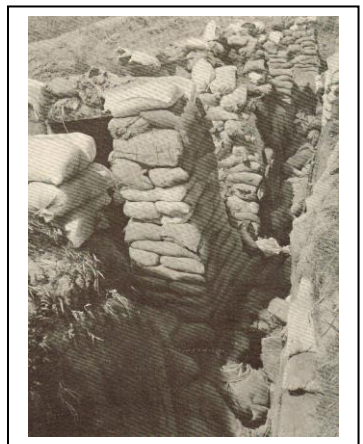
At the beginning of May the British had responded to a French request for support during their operations in the Artois region, and the Canadians had been ordered further southwards* in mid-month to the area of Festubert and, in June, to that of Givenchy-les-la-Bassée.

**Most of the Canadian units had already been in northern France in the area of Bailleul – resting, re-organizing and re-enforcing after Second Ypres - when the orders had arrived.*

(Right: *German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth – complete with corpses - captured by the French during their Pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorrette – Over one-hundred thousand French troops became casualties during this campaign in the Artois. – from Illustration*)

At Festubert the British gains were to be negligible, an advance of some three kilometres, and in the ten days during which the action had lasted, the British High Command was to contrive to divest itself of what had remained after the *Second Battle of Ypres* of its small, professional Army.

(continued)



There had also been a lot of good will lost between that British High Command and the Indians and Canadian forces who had also incurred heavy casualties* – the Canadians particularly so after their losses during the aforementioned *Second Ypres*.

**The Meerut Division losses totalled twenty-five hundred and those of the Canadian Division some twenty-two hundred. Those of the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion had been reasonably light, however, sixty-seven all told.*

After Festubert some of the Canadian forces had moved north almost immediately, into positions in the *Ploegsteert Sector* on the Belgian side of the frontier. There they were to remain until September and October of the following year when once again their services were to be required in France.

(Right: *A one-time officer in the Indian Army pays his respects to the fallen at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



The 14th Battalion, however, was to be posted in June to the area of *Givenchy-les-la-Bassée**, a small village not far distant south of Festubert.

Having been ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and having endured the same sort of losses, although fewer in number, from having repeated the same mistakes - by July 1 the unit was then to be back north in billets in the area of the Franco-Belgian border with the other battalions of the 1st Canadian Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector*.

**Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*



(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*)

During the period of 1915-1916 now to be spent in Belgium, there were to be only two occasions on which units of the Canadian Divisions would be required to fight concerted infantry actions – the first to be the *Action at the St-Éloi Craters* and the second, the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel** – otherwise there were to pass some fourteen months of the routines and rigours – and perils - of trench warfare**.

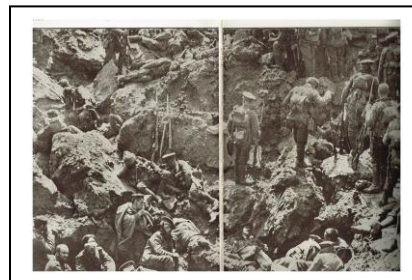
**In only the second of these engagements was the 14th Battalion to any extent engaged.*

***During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less 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 position at times for weeks on end.

(Right: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)



The *Battle of the St. Eloi Craters* – the action to involve troops of the 2nd Canadian Division – was to officially take place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St. Eloi (*St-Éloi, Sint-Elooi*) was – and is - a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was to be there that the British would excavate a series of galleries under the German lines. These tunnels were then to be filled with explosives which had been detonated on that March 27.

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the exhausted British troops. They had had no more success than their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th day of the month when the battle had been called off, the Germans were to be back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

(Right above: Advancing in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine – from Illustration)

Some six weeks later it was to be the turn of the 3rd Canadian Division to undergo *its* first major confrontation.

From June 2 to 14 was to be fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and also for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Hooge, Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps*.

The Canadians had apparently been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions dominating the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive which was to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they had not exploited.

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



**This was an area of the Ypres Salient, and recently having become the responsibility of the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division – officially in existence since New Year's Day, 1916, but not entirely operational until March of that year - that the Germans attacked.*

However, the situation was soon to become serious enough for units of the other Canadian Divisions to become involved.

(Right: 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)



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



The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack for the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation had been a more than sobering experience: many of the intended attacks had not gone in – those that *had* done so, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy had remained *in situ* and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

As for the 14th Battalion, on the day of the German attack, June 2, the unit had been serving in Divisional Reserve. However it had soon been called forward to the area of Zillebeke to where, during the night of June 2-3, it had advanced in individual companies and details. Having then advanced again on the following day the unit had recorded very heavy casualties – three-hundred seventy-nine *all ranks*.

On June 4 the 14th Battalion had been relieved and had retired, leaving behind two officers and fifty *other ranks* – all volunteers – to bury the dead. For the week that had followed the unit was to remain in the rear area.

The 14th Battalion War Diarist also recorded the following: *A large reinforcement of 150 men arrived on June 6th, and these were largely drawn upon to make up working parties of 150 sent out the following day. The part of the parties was to assist-in consolidation after the assault then pending. Before the assault took place the Regiment received a further 300 reinforcements and was again called upon to furnish large parties for difficult and dangerous jobs...*



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

On the evening and night of June 12, Canadian attackers had moved forward into assembly positions and had gone over the top hours later, before dawn of the 13th. The 14th Battalion had not been a component of the attacking force but it was to accompany the attackers during the assault.

Its tasks had been many and varied: carrying small arms ammunition and bombs; stretcher-bearing and evacuation of wounded to dressing-stations; supplying rations and water; wiring and carrying wire; and providing entrenching material – all of this to be accomplished while under fire.

The casualties are recorded in the War Diary: nineteen *killed in action*; twenty-two *wounded*; twenty-eight *missing in action*.

(Right: A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 – it had even resembled a hill until a British mine reduced the summit to extremely small pieces in the first week of June, 1917 - to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014)



Then the drudgery of trench warfare was now to once again become the soldier's everyday lot – but perhaps after *Mount Sorrel*, for many it would have been a welcome respite.

For the 14th Battalion things were to remain thus until August 11 when it had marched directly from the lines to the area of Steenvoorde, a commune in northern France some twenty kilometres slightly to the south-west of Ypres. On the following morning the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade – in a column almost ten kilometres long – had begun the trek towards the training area of the British 2nd Army.

(Right below: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photographs of the real thing – 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 jammed, 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.

The 14th Battalion had arrived at the training area on the morning of August 13 and had remained there to undergo intensive exercises for two weeks. Then, on August 27, it had marched to the larger centre of St-Omer from where it was then to entrain for the journey southward to Conteville.

(continued)

Having arrived in *that* community at eleven-twenty in the evening, there was yet a three-and-a-half hour march to undertake before it reached its billets. Perhaps the numerous four-hour route marches of the previous weeks had not been for nought and the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) was well on its way to *the Somme*.

(Right: *The once-impressive railway station at St-Omer, today in sore need of revitalization, through which the 14th Battalion of Canadian Infantry passed on August 27, 1916 – photograph from 2016*)



By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault 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.

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

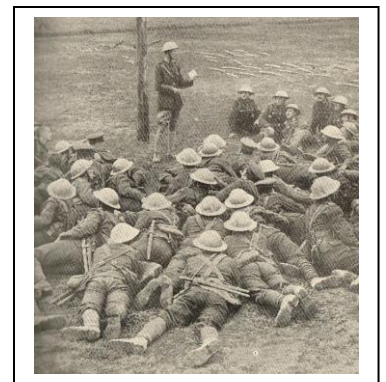
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on and about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.



Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

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

It was to be five days after having left St-Omer, the date September 1, before the 14th Battalion would march – as it had done for the last four of those five days - into the large British military camp at *the Brickfields (la Briqueterie)*, in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert – and also within range of the German artillery. Bivouacking there for a single night, on the morrow the unit had again marched, to billets in Albert itself.



The following afternoon, September 3, had seen the 14th Battalion move into reserve positions at la Boisselle and on the following day again, into the front-line trenches of *the Somme*.

(continued)

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

The unit had been ordered to relieve troops of other units in the proximity of *Mouquet Farm* on September 6 and to physically improve the positions then occupied, a task undertaken with a greater or lesser degree of success. The relievers had incurred heavy hostile shell-fire and infantry attacks, and had suffered considerable losses before having been relieved in turn on September 7. The casualty count – *all ranks* - for the two days had amounted to: forty-five *killed in action*; one-hundred twenty-one *wounded in action*; and thirty-three *missing in action*.

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

On September 9 the 14th Battalion was to begin a fifteen-day period during which it was not to be involved in any infantry action: the afore-mentioned offensive of September 15 was to be undertaken by units other than the 14th Battalion. It, and a goodly number of other troops of the 1st Canadian Division, were to go on a multi-day march.

It was to be the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, serving in the British Reserve Army, which would play a major role at Flers-Courcelette on September 15 and the days following.

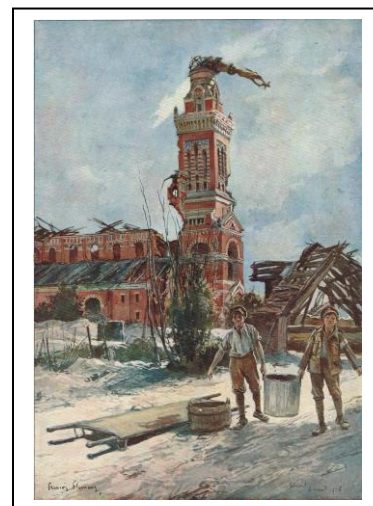
(Right: *Seen from the north, the village of Courcelette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

(Right below: *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 mid-September on the Canadians' Front.*

It was likely to free up billeting space for the new formations now arriving in the immediate area of Albert and Brickfields, that the 14th Battalion would march as far afield as Warloy, Hérissart, Montrelet – where four days of training was to take place – La Vicogne, Vadencourt – for two more days of training – before returning into reserve at *Brickfields Camp* where it was to remain until September 24-25.

Since the offensive of September 15-17 there was by now, alas, much more billeting space available for the returnees of the 14th Battalion.



Over the course of the three days of September 26, 27 and 28, the 14th Battalion was to storm the position by the name of *Kenora Trench*. It or parts of it were taken on three occasions, but for a number of reasons – not least of all German artillery and counter-attacks – the survivors of these assaults were to be obliged to pull back from the gains that they had made. By the time that the 14th Battalion was relieved it had been involved in continuous action for some forty-three hours, only to find itself back much in the place from where it had first advanced*.

**This action had been a part of the larger operation known to history as the Battle of Thiepval Ridge.*

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



In the War Diary Appendix to this operation it is noted that the 14th Battalion had incurred a total of three-hundred seventy-four casualties: *killed in action, wounded in action, died of wounds, gassed, shell-shocked and missing in action.*

This number, added to the one-hundred ninety-nine incurred earlier in the month, on September 6-7 at *Mouquet Farm*, plus smaller losses at other times, had rendered this three-week period an extremely expensive one for a unit which, on August 1, had numbered seven-hundred sixty-nine *all ranks*.

From the front lines the 14th Battalion had passed back through Albert to report to the reserve area at Warloy. An interlude of several days was now to elapse and it was not to be until October 6 that the Battalion would be once more even in Brigade Support, this to be followed by Close Support, although even while in these fairly safe positions further casualties had inevitable occurred.

And thus the 14th Battalion's role in the *First Battle of the Somme* was to draw to a close.

By October 10 the unit had been back at *Brickfields* and in bivouacs; October 14 and 15 had been spent in supplying working-parties in Brigade Support for one last time; then on the morrow, October 16, the Battalion had begun to march to the westward and away from the sound of the guns.

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

At first to the west, then northwards by a semi-circular route, the Battalion had circumnavigated the city of Arras and marched beyond. At five twenty-five in the evening of October 27 it had arrived at its destination, Brigade Reserve in the area of Berthonal, to the north-west of Arras. It had been on the march for nine of the previous eleven days.



(continued)

Having been one of the first Canadian units to serve at *the Somme*, the 14th Battalion had also been one of the first to retire from it. The sectors to which the entire Canadian Corps was now eventually to be posted would be those running roughly down the *Western Front* from Béthune in the north almost as far as Arras in the south.



In-between these two poles was the large mining centre of Lens and myriad smaller communities, their existence before the *Great War* also mainly dependent on the coal seams passing underground.



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

It was to be December of that 1916 before the final Canadians retiring from *the Somme* were to make their way, as always mostly on foot, to this area which by that time had been becoming more and more a Canadian responsibility.

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

In the trenches the 14th Battalion had once more settled into the rigours and the routines – and tedium - of trench warfare – perhaps, however, a welcome respite for those who had experienced *the Somme*; infantry action for the most part was to be on a local scale – patrolling and raids – with only occasionally the latter having been delivered at battalion strength.

Casualties for the most part had been due to enemy artillery – shell-fire apparently to be responsible for some two-thirds of *all* casualties on the *Western Front* - with snipers also having taken their toll; but in fact, during this period it was to be myriad sicknesses and, perhaps surprisingly, more than that, dental problems which would keep the medical services occupied during this time.

During the winter months of 1917 the War Diaries had reported an increase in the time spent by the Canadian units in reserve positions, be they Corps, Divisional or Brigade. In reserve there had been the usual attractions of lectures, musketry, physical training, church parades, inspections – by politicians and officers of rank - training, courses, working-parties and carrying-parties. But there had also been sports to be played and even the occasional concert to enjoy.



(Right above: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)

(Right below: *Canadian troops in front of a temporary theatre peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

Towards the end of March, however, there had been more than the usual training, there had been more construction under way, and officers and NCOs were to be withdrawn to attend special lectures. Something had apparently been in the offing.

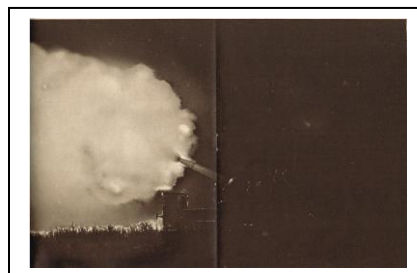
For the 14th Battalion, intensive training had begun for individual detachments: rifle-grenade and bombing sections; machine-gun and Lewis-gun sections; intelligence and signals personnel; and for others drill, musketry and bayonet practice.



But there was to be more: this was to be a programme of sometimes novel exercises undertaken by 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.

As those final days before the offensive were to pass, the artillery barrage had been growing 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 *also* been well aware that...*something was in the offing*...and their guns in their turn had by then been throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been very busy.



(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece spews its venom into the middle of the night during the course of the preparatory bombardment before the First Battle of Arras. – from Illustration*)

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



On April 6 the 14th Battalion had moved into front-line trenches in the *Thelus Sector* and had remained there.

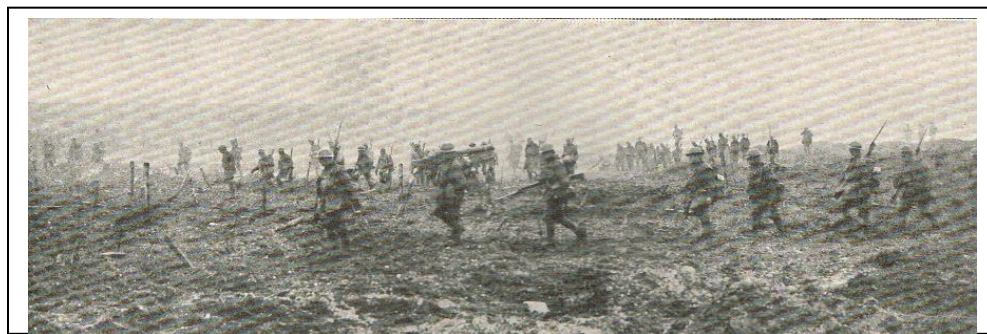
(continued)

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

On April 9 the British Army had 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 having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

While the British effort would prove an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

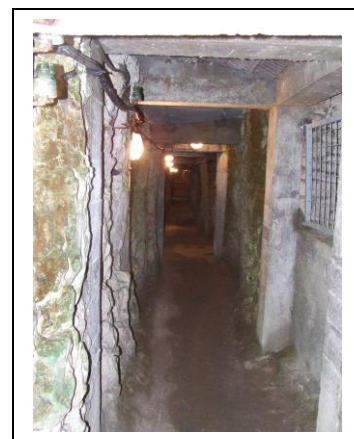
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, equipped with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time having operated as a single, autonomous entity – the 2nd Canadian Division with a British brigade under its command – had stormed the slopes of and about *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared them almost entirely of its German occupants.

Several kilometres of those tunnels had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which had afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack. But whether the 14th Battalion was to avail of their protection is not clear.

Excerpt from Battalion War Diary Appendix for April 9: *At Zero Hour, 5.30 a.m., the assault on my Battalion Sub Sector was made with No 3 Company on the right flank, furnishing the two leading waves, No 1 Company 3rd wave and “Mopping Up” Parties, No 4 Company on the left flank and No 2 Company in similar position to No 1 Company on the right. Simultaneously the 15th battalion on my right and 16th Battalion on left flank, advanced.*



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

(continued)

The 14th Battalion had been issued the responsibility of prising three objectives from the grasp of the enemy: the first, *Eizeker(?) Trench*, had been strongly defended by the Germans but was to be finally cleared; the *Black Line* had been taken with less trouble than expected; and the *Red Line* had been captured by ten past seven in the morning of that first day, apparently thanks to a well-delivered artillery bombardment of the position.

Thus the 14th Battalion had been able to retire to a less-exposed position rearwards on *Vimy Ridge* at 9. 40 a.m....*in accordance with orders.*

The 14th Battalion had gone to the attack numbering seven-hundred one *all ranks* in the field at *Zero Hour* on that April 9, 1917; at the end of the day its total casualty count had been two-hundred eighty-eight – some forty per cent of its strength.

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



**The positions to which they had retired had apparently been prepared, and some historians feel that the enemy had already anticipated withdrawal from the Ridge which was not, in fact, the ultimate defensive position that had been supposed.*

(Right above: *A memorial to the fallen of the 1st Canadian Division stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017)*

After the official conclusion of the *Battle of Arras*, on or about May 15, some of the Canadians had been re-posted not far to the north, to the mining area of the city of Lens and other communities. Others had remained *in situ*, among them the 14th Battalion.

Such was the situation when Private Fagan reported *to duty* on June 18 at Mont St-Éloi.

* * * * *

The 14th Battalion remained in Divisional Reserve for the following eight days, then marched to *Thelus Cave*, on the southerly flank of *Vimy Ridge*, by then of course in Canadian hands. There the unit relieved the 3rd Canadian Battalion and then also acted as Brigade Support, supplying working-parties for bearing materials to the front line and for constructing dug-outs.



(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing to the front lines loaded with equipment for upcoming operations: The head-band, or ‘tump’ was adapted from a North American indigenous practice – from Le Miroir)*

Private Fagan remained in Brigade Support with his Battalion until July 4 when the unit moved forward to relieve companies of the 16th and 15th Canadian Battalions at the front.

The period from then until July 12 was to comprise little concerted infantry activity: there was the usual patrolling at night, the occasional local raid – by both sides – and wiring parties working in No-Man’s-Land. And of course there was the ever-constant artillery duel, the cause of a number of casualties*. On that July 12 the 14th Battalion was in turn relieved, withdrawing to *Fraser Camp* and thus returning to Divisional Reserve.

**It is claimed that anywhere between sixty and seventy per cent of casualties during the Great War were due artillery-fire.*

The unit remained in Divisional Reserve for some three weeks – much of the time in training and becoming familiar with varied new equipment, including that of the enemy - although it was obliged to change camps – on foot – on two occasions. On the afternoon of August 3 it was transferred into Brigade Reserve and moved south to the mining community of Mazingarbe, arriving there later in the day.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir*)

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



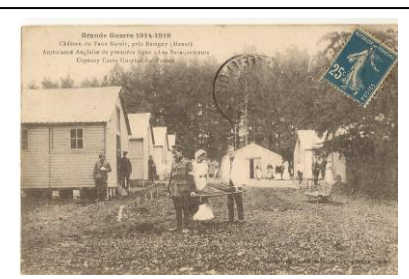
On August 5 the 14th Battalion was ordered forward to the front lines in the *Loos Sector*. On the way it was heavily shelled by the German artillery and was not to reach the forward positions until three o’clock in the morning on the following day, the 6th. By that time it had incurred twenty-two casualties: eight *killed* and fourteen *wounded*.



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

Excerpt from the 14th Battalion War Diary entry of August 5, 1918: ...*When passing through the village of PHILISOPHE, the Battalion was shelled and suffered casualties of 8 killed and 14 wounded...* These were to be the final casualties to be reported – apart from...*1 O.R. killed...* - before August 8.

It appears that Private Fagan was at first evacuated to the British 26th Field Ambulance before being forwarded to the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance at Noeux-les-Mines. He had been gassed.



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

The son of Joseph Fagan (elsewhere spelled *Fagen*), farmer, and of Fannie Fagan (likely née *Fagan, Fagen*) – to whom he had willed his all and to whom, as of April 1, 1917, he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay - of Kelligrews (some sources cite the community of *Foxtrap*), Newfoundland, he was also brother to Jacob-Joseph and to Elizabeth-Ann.



Private Fagan was reported by the commanding officer of the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance as having *Died of Shell-gas poisoning* on August 8, 1917.

(Right: *The portrait of Private Fagan is to be found in the home of Reg and Ruth Taylor, Foxtrap, Newfoundland*)

Edward Fagan had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and five months: date of birth in Kelligrews, Newfoundland, July 7, 1894 (from attestation papers and confirmed by family sources).



(Right: *Reg Taylor with his great uncle Edward Fagan in the Communal cemetery at Nœux-les-Mines – photograph from 2015*)

Private Edward Fagan 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.

