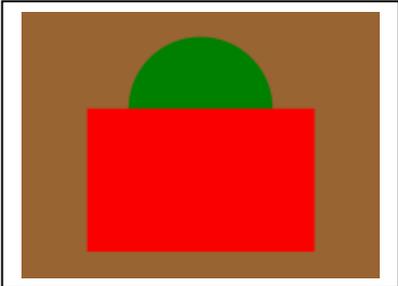




Private Mark Burton Cooper (Number 136208) of the 2nd Battalion (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*), Canadian Infantry, is buried in London Cemetery & Extension, Longueval: Grave reference, 6.F.8.

(Right above: *The image of the 2nd Battalion shoulder-flash is from Wikipedia.*)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a carpenter and house-builder, it is almost certain that Mark Burton Cooper was the young man who took ship on board the SS *Bruce* at Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland on May 5 of 1910 and sailed to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.

From North Sydney the vessel's passenger list shows that Mark Cooper was on his way to Toronto where he planned to stay with his brother. The census of 1911 confirms this as it documents him living with brother Arthur, his wife and young family, at 134, Yarmouth Road, in Toronto West*.

**Despite the fact that the census-taker records the year of his immigration as 1911, and has also an inconsistent birth-date for Mark Cooper, the evidence that this is in fact the present document's Mark Cooper is extremely convincing.*

Having presented himself for medical examination in Toronto on August 27 of 1915, he then underwent both enlistment – *one year or duration of the war and six months after* - and attestation on that same day. Upon his enlistment, Private Cooper was *taken on strength** by the 36th Peel Regiment, a Canadian Militia formation, thus *not* a unit that was destined to serve overseas**. As in the case of Private Cooper, its recruits were passed to other units, 'A' Company of the 74th Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force being the one to which he was transferred on September 13.

**Both his enlistment and attachment on this date are confirmed by his first pay records.*

***Militia units had been formed entirely for Home Defence, therefore, although recruiting was done, those who enlisted were transferred to the so-called 'overseas battalions'.*

Only four days after his transfer, on September 17, the formalities of Private Cooper's enlistment were brought to a conclusion by the Commanding Officer of the Peel Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel R.C. Windeyer, when he declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The 74th Battalion had been mobilized at Camp Niagara which is where Private Cooper likely was posted up until such time as the unit was ordered on *overseas service*. The camp was to be temporary home to a number of battalions during the time of the Great War, some seventy-five thousand men apparently passing through its gates for basic training – mostly in Canadian, but also some in other national uniforms - during those four years.

It was on March 29, 1916, that the thirty-four officers and one-thousand forty-six *other ranks* of the 74th Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain* in the harbour at Halifax.

Also on board were also to be the 53rd and 75th Battalions, perhaps a reported heavy artillery draft, and the 7th Draft, 'B' Section, of the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance. It was a total of some three-thousand five-hundred military personnel in all. Three days later the vessel sailed in the company of the ships *Adriatic* and *Baltic*, the three-ship convoy – and its eight-thousand six-hundred passengers - escorted by the cruiser *HMS Carnarvon* of the Royal Navy.



(Right above: *The image of the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*)

After an uneventful Atlantic crossing, *Empress of Britain* – by that time also escorted by four destroyers - put into the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on April 9. Disembarked by four o'clock on that afternoon, Private Cooper's Battalion immediately boarded trains and travelled south to the county of Hampshire.

De-training at two in the morning in the village of Liphook, the unit then marched to the military establishment in the vicinity of another nearby small community, a village which had lent its name to that Canadian camp: Bramshott. There Private Cooper's Battalion was amalgamated into the 16th Canadian Infantry Brigade.



(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott.* – photograph from 2016)

Private Cooper was to remain at Bramshott until June 8, 1916, when he travelled overseas once more, the voyage on this occasion being the short crossing of the English Channel to the Continent. Likely sailing from the English south-coast port of Southampton, his detachment spent only a few hours at the Canadian General Base Depot in the area of the French port-city of Le Havre from where, on June 10, he was one of a draft that was despatched to join his new unit.



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

The new unit in question was to be the 2nd Battalion of Canadian Infantry (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*)* to which he had, at least on paper, been transferred and by which he had been *taken on strength* – again on paper - on June 9 at the Base Depot. He is documented as having reported *to duty* with the parent unit of the 2nd Battalion *in the field* on June 11.

**Not to be confused with the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, to which other reinforcements had been attached from the 74th Battalion.*

* * * * *

The 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Eastern Ontario*), a unit of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade – itself an element of the Canadian Division - had sailed from Canada in October of 1914 on the convoy which was to bring the troops of the Canadian Division* - the first overseas contingent - across the Atlantic** to the United Kingdom.

**The Canadian Division was designated thus until the formation of the Canadian 2nd Division when, logically, it became the 1st Canadian Division.*

***Joined off the south coast of Newfoundland by the SS Florizel which had embarked the First Five Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment.*

(continued)

The 2nd Battalion had been among the very first Canadian units to set foot on the Continent. After a stormy passage from the English west-coast port of Avonmouth, it had disembarked in the French port of St-Nazaire on or about February 11 of 1915 with the other units of the Canadian Division.

The 2nd Battalion had then at first been posted to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier only days after its arrival in France, entering the trenches for the first time near the northern French town of Armentières. It had then served in the Fleurbaix Sector just to the south of the border before having been posted to the *Ypres Salient*. It was on April 18, at twenty-five minutes past ten in the morning, that the unit – in fact, the entire 1st Infantry Brigade - was to cross the border into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

The Brigade crossed the frontier to the west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe where it was then to remain for two days before advancing eastwards to smaller Vlamertinghe for two more. It was then that the Germans had decided to launch their attack in an effort to take the nearby city of Ypres.

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



(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)



None of the units of the Canadian Division had been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for more than a short space of time. During these few days of Canadian tenure *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet. Then the dam broke - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it. The date was April 22, 1915.



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

The 2nd *Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. It was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced masks, gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.

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(Right: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The cloud was noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, became necessary while, at the same time, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Infantry Brigade were moved forward to support the efforts of the French and of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade.

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

By the second day, the 23rd, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement became necessary. At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.



The 2nd Battalion remained attached to the 3rd Brigade to the north-east of *the Salient* until April 25 when it withdrew towards Vlamertinghe and re-joined its parent 1st Brigade. Remaining there to rest on the following day, the unit was then ordered forward to occupy positions near a pontoon bridge on the Yser Canal. Heavily shelled on the morrow, the Battalion returned to its billets at Vlamertinghe on the 29th.



There it was to remain until May 3 when it was withdrawn further, to the northern French centre of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and re-organize.

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

On May 15 the 2nd Battalion was ordered to move down the line further into France via Colonne and Hinges to Béthune from where it was then to advance three days afterwards towards the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

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There at Festubert, a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not comprising the same numbers of troops – would not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered heavily*.

**The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7th (Meerut) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert - had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.*



The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

**The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right above: A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?))

On the final day of May the 2nd Battalion had been relieved from its posting at Festubert and on June 1 was in billets in Essars; in nine days' time it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant from Festubert. Despatched into the forward trenches from June 11 to 17 to support British efforts, the unit incurred the same sort of results – fourteen killed, seventy-nine wounded - from repeating the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert. By June 17, the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area, the 2nd Battalion among the first to do so.

**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.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 2nd Battalion was to march to billets in or near to the community of Oblinghem, two kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune. From there on June 25, it began to move towards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert, there the 2nd Battalion would remain – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

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



The Canadian Division* was to remain in that border area of West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.

During the period up until June of 1916, on the fronts for which the 1st Canadian and the lately-arrived 3rd Canadian Division* were responsible, neither side had made any concerted attempt to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches. As with all the other units at the front, 2nd Battalion's time was divided between postings to the front-line trenches, to the support positions, and into reserve. Casualties were caused mostly by artillery fire***, snipers, and the occasional raid on the enemy lines.**

****The 3^d Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916.***

*****There was an altercation in March and April of 1916 in an area further south towards the Franco-Belgian frontier. However, the action of the St-Éloi Craters had at first involved British troops before Canadian battalions of the 2nd Division became involved – but the 2nd Battalion (Eastern Ontario) was a unit of the Canadian 1st Division and played no role whatsoever.***

******It is estimated that over sixty percent of the all the casualties of the Great War were due to artillery-fire.***

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Maple Copse* 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*)

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



The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences.

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But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, had proved a costly disaster for the Canadians.

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

The German attack had primarily been on the part of the front held by the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division but such was its ferocity that units from the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions were called upon to help hold the line. The 2nd Battalion had thus been sent forward on June 3 to what then remained of the front-line and second-line defences. Heavily shelled during this entire period, it was relieved in the evening of June 7 and was to play no further part in the fighting at *Mount Sorrel*. It had incurred one-hundred twenty-two casualties during these four days.



* * * * *

The 2nd Battalion had withdrawn to a camp in the rear area by the time of Private Cooper's arrival to the unit on June 11. The Battalion War Diary makes no mention of any re-enforcement draft reporting on this day but then nor does it appear to do so either for the remainder of that month or even for July.

The remainder of June, then July and August were relatively quiet in *the Salient*, the Canadians being subjected only to what had by then become the routines and rigours of trench warfare*.

**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.

(Right above: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme (see below) in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier – likely while still in Belgium - having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration*)

(continued)

But things were happening elsewhere on the *Western Front* and by the middle of August Private Cooper and the Canadians of the 2nd Battalion were in training in anticipation of another move southward into France, and to the area of *the Somme*. By the end of the month they had already arrived there and on August 31st had relieved some Australian units in the front-line trenches near Bapaume.

The 1st *Battle of the Somme* had by that September of 1916 been ongoing for some two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being 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 day at Beaumont-Hamel.

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

As the Battle had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were 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 collective offensive contribution was to be on September 15 in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



But the 2nd Battalion (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*) had gone into action four days earlier.

Excerpt from 2nd Battalion War Diary entry for September 9, 1916: ...Companies moved up into position preparatory to attack. 3. pm. Companies entered "JUMPING OFF TRENCH", dug toe holes, and fixed bayonets. 4.25 pm everything in readiness. 4.45 pm barrage opened, men leaped over parapet, and advanced as close as possible to German Front line. 4.48 pm barrage lifted, and our right companies gained objective. On LEFT our men were held up for a few minutes, by heavy machine gun fire...



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



The Battalion incurred two-hundred fifty-five casualties all told during these two days in the trenches.

(continued)

