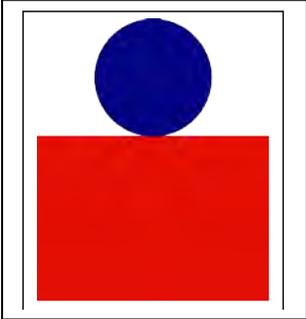




Private John (also known as *Jack*) Bernard Croak, VC (Number 445312) of the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Infantry, is buried in Hangard Wood British Cemetery: Grave reference I. A. 9.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.*)



(continued)

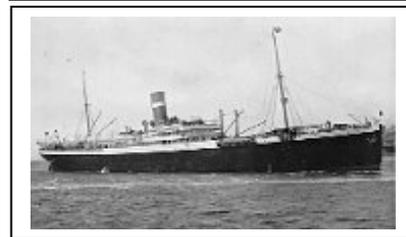
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer (this on his enlistment papers - elsewhere as a *coal miner*), John Bernard Croak is variously documented as having immigrated with his parents and siblings from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Glace Bay, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, in 1898 (1901 Census) and 1900 (1911 Census).

He presented himself for enlistment – his first pay-records confirm this - in the county town of Sussex, New Brunswick, on August 6 of 1915, the day before he underwent a medical examination and also attestation. He was *taken on strength* on the date of his enlistment to the 55th (*New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island*) Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, a formation which by that time was already undergoing training at the newly-established military camp at Valcartier, Québec. Private Croak reported there on August 11 and a medical file places him there having a further inoculation at the hospital on the base on September 15 and October 10.

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



It was at the end of October of that year, on the 30th, that the forty-two officers and one-thousand ninety-nine *other ranks* of the 55th Battalion boarded the requisitioned *Allan Line* steamship *Corsican* at Québec*. The ship sailed on the following day, then arrived in the English south-coast naval port of Devonport on either November 8 or 9 (the sources disagree).



**Another source has the port being Montreal.*

Private Croak and the 55th Battalion were not to take passage alone to the United Kingdom; also travelling on *Corsican* was the 2nd Draft of the Divisional (1st Division) Signals Company.

(Right above: *The photograph of His Majesty's Transport Corsican is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Upon disembarkation the personnel of the 55th Battalion boarded a train – or trains – to be immediately transported to the Canadian military complex by then established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott, in the southern English county of Hampshire countryside. There the formation was to remain as a reserve pool for other Battalions already on the Continent, until it was eventually totally absorbed by the 40th Battalion in June of the following year*.



(continued)

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

It was, unfortunately, only a matter of three days after having landed in England that Private Croak ran afoul of the 55th Battalion authorities: on November 12 he was awarded one-hundred sixty-eight hours – one week – of detention *for drunkenness*. This was to be a continual problem for both parties during the remainder of Private Croak's military service: the charge at times varied, but the problem almost always seemed to have the same source – drink*.

**There appear further charges on at least fifteen occasions, awarded with various degrees of Field Punishment, detention and forfeiture of pay (see below).*

While there is no mention of any further movement from Bramshott by the 55th Battalion appearing in the available documents, Private Croak's own file records him being at Westenhanger on the Kentish coast during much of the months of February and March, 1916. This was a period in which he received fifty-five days of Field Punishment Number 2 – this *could* include being kept in irons (or straps and ropes) plus hard labour – so Westenhanger may have been a detention centre.

It is not recorded either when Private Croak returned to Bramshott *from Westenhanger* - *if* indeed he ever did. On April 9, three days prior to his being transferred to the 13th Battalion and to his imminent passage to France, he wrote a will in which he bequeathed everything to his mother. However, while the paper is dated and his unit – 55th Battalion – is noted on that paper, no clue of *where* it was written is to be found.

Private Croak left England for France on April 15, 1916, and upon his draft's disembarkation, was sent to the Canadian General Base Depot in the vicinity of the French port-city of Le Havre at the estuary of the River Seine. He reported there on April 16. There on the same day he was officially *taken on strength* of the 13th Battalion.



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

On May 7 Private Croak is documented as having left Le Havre to join his unit *in the field*, his files recording him as then having reported *to duty* on the following day, May 8*.

* * * * *

The 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the Canadian Division*. In mid-October of 1914 the Division had been the first force to arrive in Canada from the United Kingdom and then had been the first Canadian unit to set foot on French soil which it had done in February of 1915.



(continued)

****Until the time that the 2nd Canadian Division was formed, it was simply referred to as the Canadian Division.***



(Preceding page: The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site)

(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)

For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. There, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the situation was relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13th Battalion began to fit into the rigours and the routines of life in the trenches*.

****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: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)



In mid-April the Division, moving north into the Kingdom of Belgium, eventually took up positions in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the Great War. And whereas the first weeks of the Canadian presence on the Continent had been relatively quiet, the dam was about to burst - although it was to be 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. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the 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.

(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, particularly that of the 13th Battalion which was obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, by the entire unit became necessary.



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

By 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 13th Battalion was relieved on April 25 and was withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, it remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it withdrew into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres. On May 3 the unit was ordered to move into northern France, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.



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

(continued)

The information to be gleaned from the Battalion War Diary during the period of 2nd Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred is apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5th Brigade Diary – but it was on April 28 that a re-enforcement draft of two-hundred seventy-six other ranks reported *to duty* to the unit.

In mid-May the 13th Battalion moved down the line to the south, over the Franco-Belgian frontier, and into 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.

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 possessing the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered.

The role of the 13th Battalion was to relieve the 16th Canadian Battalion after its attack planned for May 20 on a German-held position, and then was to consolidate and defend that same position. Despite heavy losses the 16th captured its objective, positions which then the 13th Battalion occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men fought and repelled a strong German counter-attack before then being relieved on the following day again.



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 May 22 the 13th Battalion marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. The reprieve was to last for two weeks, until June 5, when it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and incurring many of its casualties due to repeating the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert – by June 24 the 13th Battalion was retiring from the area. At about the same time, over a number of days, so was the entire Canadian Division.

(continued)

****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 13th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then Steenwerck, all in the vicinity of Bailleul. From there it was to move eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 13th Battalion remained – 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 above: 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)

It was to be another eleven months before the 13th Battalion* was involved in a further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers ensured a constant flow of casualties.

In September of 1915 it was the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the Kingdom of Belgium. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent to the north of the one held by Private Croak and the now-designated Canadian 1st Division. The area was several kilometres south of the city of Ypres and it was there, after some seven months of life in and about the trenches, that the 2nd Division was about to fight its first major action of the *Great War*.

For the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April were not to be as tranquil as those being experienced during the same period by Private Croak and his comrades-in-arms of the 1st Division.

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



(Above right: A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration)

(continued)

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

However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2nd Division affair and the personnel of the 13th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* had drawn to its close less than a month prior to May 7 or 8, the date on which Private Croak reported *to duty* with the 13th Battalion*. The unit was encamped in the rear area at the time, in positions known as the Dominion Lines, but was preparing to move forward again, which it did on the 9th. The Battalion War Diary makes mention of a draft arriving on the 8th and that it... *received instruction in the use of tube helmets**, but there are no further details.

**By the time that he did, in March and April of 1916 the Canadian 1st Division had been transferred from the Ploegsteert Sector to the area of the Ypres Salient in the southern outskirts of the remnants of Ypres. It was still adjacent to the Canadian 2nd Division, but now to its left-hand and northern flank. And the 3rd Canadian Division – having officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916 – had recently taken over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of the Ypres Salient.*

***These were surely the bag-like affairs to counter gas, masks which covered the entire head, as shown in a photograph on a previous page.*

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* was fought out between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



(Above right: *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 Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, thereupon reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground.

Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(Right below: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)

The events of that June 2 had interrupted a busy day for the 13th Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports in the afternoon.

Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3rd Division sector, orders had been given... *for the Battalion to 'stand to' and be ready to move at a moment notice... Soon after this the Battalion was ordered to proceed to the support of the Canadian 14th Battalion and made a forced march... to Zillebeke Etang...*



The 13th Battalion had not been involved in the disastrous counter-offensives made by Canadian troops on June 3 and was, in fact, engaged in only defensive activities. Even so, the casualty count for June 2 and 3 numbered forty-four.

On June 4 there was no concerted action by the Canadians; the 13th Battalion spent much of its time consolidating positions and sending out reconnaissance parties, all the time receiving the attention of the German artillery. Casualties for June 4 came to a total of forty-eight.

The War Diarist's entry for the 5th reports no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion. There were reported, nonetheless, thirty *killed, wounded or missing in action.*

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

On June 6 the War Diarist once again reports little activity in the area of the 13th Battalion. Nor does he report – but, then, why should he? – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at Hooze Village. The Germans had then managed to gain some territory before their advance was contained. The 13th suffered half-a-dozen casualties on that day.



Late in the night of the 7th, following an uneventful day – by the standards of the time – and with no casualties due to enemy activity, the Battalion was withdrawn to the south-west of Ypres to arrive in their billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8th.

(continued)

There the unit remained until June 11 when it began a march which was to bring the Battalion back to the area of Mount Sorrel where it would serve in the now-imminent assault. By midnight of that June 12, some twenty-eight hours after beginning its return march, the 13th Battalion was in its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry for June 12-13) At 1. 30 a.m. immediately our artillery lifted to the old British trenches, our men, the first and second line under Major K.M. Perry, the third and fourth under Major G.E. McCuaig sprang up on the parapet and set off at a steady pace, over very rough ground and through a heavy barrage and succeeded in gaining the first objective...

As soon as the bombardment of the old British lines lifted at 1.50 a.m. the party again advanced at this stage the going was very heavy...

The attack proceeded briskly, bombing the enemy down the trenches, and directly the final objective was reached, Major McCuaig sent up a red flare...

The affair was over by mid-morning, the remainder of the day spent in consolidation, taking care of the wounded of both sides and of prisoners... and in the burial of the dead. The 13th Battalion retired later that night.

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 until the 13th – had thus culminated with this second and more successful, having been better prepared and also supported by a confident artillery programme - counter-attack by the Canadians on June 13. It was the final offensive of the confrontation, a military *quid pro quo* which left both sides in approximately the same positions that they had been occupying on June 2 when the affair had started.



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

For the two months which succeeded the confrontation at Mount Sorrel, things reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity being again limited to raids and patrols. However, this did not preclude a lengthy casualty list at times*.

**For example, during the tour in the front lines of July 15 to 19 inclusive, the War Diarist noted fifty-seven killed, wounded and missing in action.*

During the month of August the Canadian Battalions were gradually withdrawn from the Ypres Salient and ordered to camps for training in what was termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 13th Battalion was one of the first to retire, leaving the forward area for Brigade Support on August 7, then three days later moving further to the rear area to begin that period of training.

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, Private Croak's Battalion moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer. The unit entrained there at seven o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres, where it arrived some nine hours afterwards, at four o'clock in the afternoon. From there it was to be a further eight kilometres – this time on foot – to the awaiting billets.

(Right: *Almost a century after Private Croak and the 13th Battalion passed through it on the way to the 1st Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation – photograph from 2015*)



For the following four days Private Croak and his comrades-in-arms marched south-east, ending their trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1, before moving onto support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(Right: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?)*)



**La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

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 costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which nineteen thousand dead.

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

On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those 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 lost so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.



As the battle had progressed, other 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.

They to become part of a third general offensive, their first *collective* contribution to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

(Right: *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*)



However, there was, twelve days before that general attack by the Canadians, on September 3, an assault put in by the 13th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force at a place known as Mouquet Farm. Two Companies of the 13th Battalion, 1 and 2, were sent forward to assist in this operation at nine o'clock that morning.

The 13th Battalion War Diary for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially thus: *At 2.00p.m. No.3 Company... went forward and at 5.00 p.m. the remainder of the Battalion:-*

Headquarters – Pozieres Wood

Nos 1 and 2 Companies advanced and held the positions 73 to No. 1

93 to No. 2 and consolidated.

No. 1 Company, Bombing the German Communication, and No. 2 Company, repelling a German Attack...

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



...During the whole of Sunday Night, the men were heavily shelled, but showed great courage and endurance (sic).

Sept 4th. ...The heavy shelling continued the whole of the day, on the Front and Support Lines, the Battalion also suffered a heavy Counter Attack. We managed however to connect up 55 and 59 and make a fair trench...

1916 5th Sept. ...The heavy shelling continued again on both sides, during the whole of the day, our Artillery was very active with guns of all Calibres, and fired over about two shells for every German one...

Maybe not a major affair in the eyes of certain authorities, the action at Mouquet Farm on September 3 and 4 was to cost the 13th Battalion a total of three-hundred twenty-three casualties.

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



(continued)

The 13th Battalion remained in the forward area until September 7, then in the town of Albert until the 9th when the unit was ordered on a march in stages to a Rest Area in the proximity of the community of Bonneville. At Bonneville for three days, it was then ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby Brickfields (*La Briqueterie*). It encamped there on the 18th, three days after the Canadian general offensive of September 15.

It is not recorded how Private Croak and his fellow soldiers felt about this march to nowhere-in-particular and back, but the War Diarist of that time made the following entry: *...A halt was called for a short time at Warloy, and another longer halt was called for at a point not far from Senlis. These rests however were not appreciated much as it was too wet to sit down, the men were wet through and very weary, with standing with their heavy packs*, although they sang and whistled throughout the march**. ...The only member of the Battalion that seemed to thoroughly enjoy the hill climbing expedition was the Regimental Goat Pet (the Pipers Goat).*

**Perhaps the officers and troops were wearing the kilts that they had worn until the beginning of September when they had been allowed to wear shorts if they wished; it must be remembered that a single kilt is made from fifteen yards of woollen cloth – heavy when dry: extremely heavy when wet.*

***Apparently they were accompanied on the march not only by the pipers' goat, but by the pipers themselves, the pipe band marching second only to the Headquarters Detachment.*

The 13th Battalion took over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, relieving the 2nd Canadian Battalion near to the village of Courcelette. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit remained there for only two days before retiring into support once more. It was then withdrawn into billets in Albert two days later again, on the 27th and further back to Warloy on the morrow.

(Right below: After the fighting of Courcelette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir)

Warloy, within hours' marching distance of Albert, was where the Battalion was stationed for a week; during that time it was involved in drills, parades, inspections, a bath for everyone in the unit, church, lectures, musketry and replacing worn equipment and clothing. At the end of those seven days it made that march once more to Albert and then, on the 6th, continued on to the camp at Brickfields.



The Battalion was now prepared for the upcoming offensive action to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps – in conjunction with the British 3rd Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the objective of the 13th Battalion was to be a German position designated as *Regina Trench*.

(continued)

Unfortunately it appears that the appropriate page of the 13th Battalion War Diary is missing. However, the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade offers some information, albeit less detailed, on the day's happenings.

The attack went in on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8th.

The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War Diary:

7.45 a.m. 13th Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.

9.15 a.m. Message... stating 13th Bn. stopped by German wire.

9.25 a.m. 13th Bn. report situation unchanged.

12.19 p.m. Message... ordering 13th Bn. to hold on to original position (jumping off line) and to try connect up in the evening with the left of the 16th Bn.



5.30 p.m. Message from 13th Bn. timed 2.25 pm. gives position of 13th Bn. Those who got into REGINA Trench were bombed towards the 16th Bn. Remainder were held up by barbed wire and were practically wiped out by M.G. fire.

6.00 p.m. 15th Bn. report at 3.45 p.m. that 13th Bn. called on 3 platoons of the reinforcing company of 15th Bn. and these are being replaced at dusk.

13th Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.

On October 9 the 13th Battalion held on in their former jumping off positions despite... heavy shelling for the greater part of the day... On the night of October 9-10 the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade retired... and the 13th Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.

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

The Battalion War Diarist entered the figure of some three-hundred casualties* for the day of October 8 alone.

**On the entries of days following he also notes imprecise numbers of those originally reported as 'missing' who, by then were reporting to duty with the unit.*



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

On October 11 the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) began their march away from the 1st Battle of the Somme. Passing to the west – always on foot - by a circuitous route behind the city of Arras and then beyond, the unit arrived in a sector further north up the line, on this occasion in the general area of the mining centre of Lens.

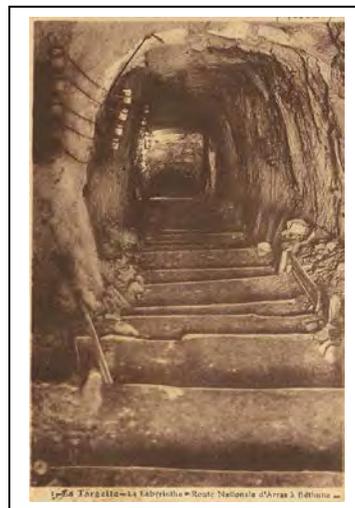
More precisely, Private Croak and colleagues found themselves relieving the 13th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment in trenches at Cabaret and Souchez. The date was October 27.



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

The following months were spent by the 13th Battalion in the same and also adjacent sectors. The officers and men once more settled into an existence in – and out of – the trenches. On February 11 of 1917 the Battalion War Diarist noted Private Croak as being the only casualty of the day – likely from sickness; on that day, while the unit withdrew into reserve, *he* was admitted into hospital. Unfortunately there appear no further precise details in either the War Diary or among his own documents.

On March 4 the 13th Battalion began a two-day march from Ruitz – behind the lines – and, during the night of March 6-7, relieved the Canadian 20th Battalion in support positions near Maison Blanche, in the vicinity of the village of Neuville St-Vaast. Some six days later, on March 12, it was time for another battalion to take the place of the 13th in *support* and for the 13th to take over trenches in the front line.



However, during those days spent at Maison Blanche, the personnel of the 13th Battalion had not been idle. It must have been apparent to all that there was something big afoot if the tasks allotted to – or witnessed by – Private Croak, if indeed he had returned from his stay in hospital by then, and also by his peers – and as noted in the War Diary, is evidence to go by:

(Right above: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinthe* – from a vintage post-card)

March 9th ...Throughout the day there was a considerable amount of work to be done one way or another. Trench stores etc., had to be checked up, as also had the gas appliances and ammunition... A considerable amount of work had to be done in the way of cleaning up, and reconstructing the weak parts in the dugouts... The Battalion work parties... consisted of the following... working on Vase Tunnel... (another) pushing trucks for Tunnelling Company... cleaning Burn (a small stream)... burying cable from support to Front Line... The list is not exhaustive.

The period in the front lines added other duties similar to those listed above: carrying parties, wiring parties, burial parties and observation of the fall of friendly artillery fire also became part of the routine. Six days later again, on the 18th, the unit retired once more into Reserve in the area of Bois-les-Alleux and Mont St-Éloi, avoiding the main roads on the way.



The Battalion was to remain in this area until April 8 when it began to move forward in anticipation of the forthcoming attack.

(Preceding page and right: *The village of Mont St-Éloi at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partially destroyed in 1793 and further again during the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



Through the use of a system of by-then disused French trenches in the area, the Battalion was able to be assembled and to be ready five hours prior to Zero Hour and, in doing so, had incurred only two slight casualties.

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



While the British campaign proved to be an over disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be a disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood 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 – there was even a British brigade serving under Canadian command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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



The Battalion War Diarist described the 13th Battalion's role on April 9 thus: *During the Operations of April 9th the Battalion was in Brigade Support, so we were unable to report on many of the incidents which occurred ahead of the Battalion. We maintained communication between the attacking Battalions and Brigade during the whole of the operations, and were more or less a Report Centre. This was owing to the forward Battalions being unable to keep their wires intact.*

(continued)

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



On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in case of the expected German counter-attacks. There had on that day been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not 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.

On the night of May 4-5, the entire Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade retired from the front to the area of Mont St-Éloi, then on May 6 a further six-and-a-half kilometres to Chateau de la Haie, before a final march to Gouy-Servins, mercifully less than two kilometres distant, where the unit was to remain until the end of the month.



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

The months of June and July were spent much in the routine of front, support and reserve. Towards the latter part of July the Battalion was withdrawn to the area of Noeux-les-Mines and then Aix-Noulette for extra training.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers and an officer during the summer of 1917, the photograph showing the conditions under which the Canadians were obliged to work and fight* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

At this point the gods appear to have decided to smile on Private Croak and on July 25 he began a ten-day period of leave which he is reported to have spent in the United Kingdom. When he returned *to duty* it would have been to learn that the 13th Battalion was to play a major role in the upcoming attack on *Hill 70*, in the outskirts of Lens.



(Right above: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

(continued)

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



(Right above: *A further 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*)

The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

(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.

Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.

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



Objectives were 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 was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

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

(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, hidden from aerial observation under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)



But by the time that his comrades-in-arms attacked at *Hill 70* on August 15 - and only six days after he had reported back to *duty* from England - Private Croak was again elsewhere. That smile of the gods in this case had been a bit of a two-edged sword: he was absent from what was to be a costly battle, but he was now in hospital, in need of treatment from multiple venereal diseases.

He had been admitted into the 51st General Hospital* at Rouen on August 14, the day before the attack.

**Private Croak's pay-roll records indicate that, as was the case with a great number of British and Empire (Commonwealth) soldiers suffering from venereal disease, he was deducted fifty per cent of his pay each day that he was in hospital. Apparently this rather hypocritical treatment of military personnel was relaxed to a degree as the war drew towards its conclusion.*

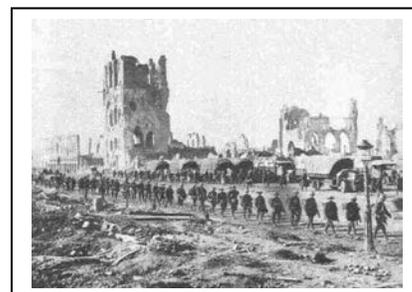


(Right above: *The River Seine flows through the centre of the Norman capital city of Rouen and under the watchful eye of its venerable cathedral. – from a vintage post-card*)

By September 6, the date on which Private Croak was discharged from the 51st General Hospital, the Canadian operations in the Lens area had drawn to a close*. On that same day, Private Croak was sent to report to Base Details, and was thus despatched to the 1st Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étaples, some one-hundred sixty kilometres up the coast. He arrived there on the following day.

**They had been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command were looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and then the Canadians were ordered to prepare to move north, thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.*

It was just over five weeks later again, on October 14 that Private Croak began to make his way back to the 13th Battalion. On the 15th he is documented as having arrived at the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp where, on the 18th, he was apparently put on charges for the usual misdemeanours. He left there on the 25th of the same month and reported back to duty with his unit on October 28.



(Right above: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

In the middle of October the Canadians were ordered north into Belgium and to the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the end of that July - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was, ostensibly, one of the Army's objectives.



(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

(continued)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions who spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the *official* end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



(Right above: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

(Right below: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument – this, according to 12th Brigade maps, is where the unit was in trenches on October 30 of 1917. – photograph from 2010*)

On that October 18th of Private Croak's return to his unit, the 13th Battalion was in the process of being bussed to the area of Staple on the French side of the Franco-Belgian frontier. It had moved from its former quarters in the *Lens Sector* a week or so previously and since then had been seconded by the Canadian 3rd Division to serve as road-builders in the outskirts of Ypres. It was likely at Staple that Private Croak rejoined his unit.



During the next two days the Battalion remained billeted at Staple while its senior officers and N.C.O.s inspected models of the battlefield. On the 31st the entire unit was prepared for the transfer to the real thing. It marched to Eblinghem from where it was taken by train to Ypres.



(Right: *The railway station at Ypres (Ieper) in 1919, a year after the conflict – from a vintage post-card*)

From the station Private Croak and his fellow soldiers marched north-east through the remnants of the city and then across country to nearby Wieltje where they attempted to make themselves comfortable in the open air. They also attracted the attention of a German *Gotha* bomber and, of course, the enemy artillery, to both of which a small number of eventual casualties were due.

On November 1 to 4 the unit was shuttled, again piecemeal, up to the forward area and then, on the 5th, back again to Wieltje, by far the majority of casualties during that tour being caused by artillery fire.



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

The Battalion War Diary entries of these days reports nothing in the way of infantry activity at all. It then records only a single further forward movement by the Battalion, on the 7th, a movement which in fact was then countermanded on the morrow with the formation falling back through Wieltje to the camp at St-Jean, an area which they had occupied during the fourth week of October.

One of its first priorities on the 10th was – despite the heavy rain - to have a bath in facilities built near the Yser Canal. On November 11 all personnel were back at the railway station for transport away from Ypres.

(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after Private Croak took his bath in huts close to there in November of 1917 – photograph from 2014)



The Battalion and the Canadian Corps in general were now leaving the *Ypres Salient* for the last time. By November 16, via such places as Brandhoek, Bailleul, Merville, Béthune, Noeux-les-Mines and Aix-Noulette, Private Croak and his fellow-soldiers had made their way south to the area of Givenchy-en-Gohelle and the Lens-Arras Road where the unit took its place once more in the forward lines and in the tedium of life in the trenches.

The 13th Battalion, during the entire month of November and in contrast to many other formations involved in the more costly confrontations during Passchendaele, was to report *only twenty-eight killed, eight died of wounds and fifty-four wounded*, including those incurred latterly in the area of Lens.

The month of December offered something a little different to all the Canadian formations which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least *some* units, was in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

December, January, February and the first three weeks of March, 1918, were a quiet time and casualties for days on end recorded as nil, not only for the 13th Battalion but for the entire Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade. But on that fourth week of March, things changed, and, even in the area of Lens, the unit was to be more heavily shelled than usual.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, they delivered a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', launched on March 21.

(continued)

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there*.



(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they did bombard it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Miroir*)

The German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

**A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division.*



It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.

(Right above: *The medieval City Hall of Arras and its bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)

The 13th Battalion received orders to *stand by* on March 25; by the 26th it had been transferred to the area of Fosse 10 in the expectation of a German attack which, in fact, never materialized. A single day later again, on the 27th, it was being billeted behind the lines in huts at Chateau de la Haie.

(Right below: *An unidentified Canadian-Scottish unit, preceded by its pipe-band, on the march somewhere on the Continent – from Le Miroir*)

The 28th of March was the day of a long early-morning bus-ride and a ten-kilometre march which saw the Battalion personnel in billets in the village of Humbercourt for perhaps three hours on that afternoon. Then yet another bus-ride and a further march – only seven kilometres on this particular occasion – culminated in more billets in the community of Agnez-les-Duisans, just to the west of Arras.



The War Diarist deserves the last words of the day, likely with his tongue boring a hole through his cheek:

...It was remarked by several old members of the Battalion that the morale of all ranks under such trying conditions had never been better. The last few days of “continual stand-to” and trying moves were far harder than being in the front line trenches.

(Right below: *A not particularly flattering image of the village – not all are quaint! - of Agnez-les-Duisans almost a century after Private Croak’s 13th Battalion billeted here in March of 1917 – photograph from 2013*)

The next day was no easier on the collective feet of the 13th Battalion: it was a march of a further twelve kilometres to the Grand’ Place in the remnants of the city of Arras and an extra kilometre for the two Companies which had been assigned billets in the not-too-far-distant Ronville Caves, galleries which had been excavated by the *Tunnelling Troops* earlier in the war.



(Right below: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system, almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. It was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions. – photograph from 2012*)

March 31 was Easter Sunday: there was a church service in the morning, a bathing-parade in the afternoon and in the evening... the entire battalion, with the exception of a few headquarter details, went out as a working-party, digging reserve trenches to the west of Arras.

On April 5 the Battalion was moved forward into Brigade Reserve and then marched south towards Beaurains where, according to the War Diarist, whose sense of humour must at times have come close to getting him shot – by his own side - ... *Headquarters was situated in a sap but the majority of the men were in the Ypres-style corrugated (sic) bivouacs which are perfectly bomb-proof – unless something hit them...*



(Below right: *Likely the type of shelters to which the Diarist was referring – from Le Miroir*)

On April 7, Private Croak and his unit were marched west to Dainville before almost retracing their steps – by bus - on the morrow to relieve the 2nd Duke of Wellington Regiment to the north-east of Arras. Here they apparently remained – there was to be little fighting and all of it of a local nature - until April 13 when the entire Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade retired to become Corps Reserve.



The 13th Battalion and Private Croak were thus subjected to further hours of marching as they passed through the communities of Bray and Marœuil before halting at St-Aubin where they were billeted.

This pause – so it was claimed - was to allow the entire Brigade the opportunity to recuperate from the exertions of the previous three weeks. There was, however, a caveat: Excerpt from 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry of April 14: ...8.00 pm. *On instructions from 1st Canadian Division all Units were warned to be prepared to move to any part of the Corps Front on 4 hours notice.*

The 13th Battalion was now to once more settle into the daily routine of trench warfare, a routine which perhaps confirmed the adage – maybe even *coined* at that time – that war is ten percent terror and ninety percent boredom.

The Germans were by now exhausted from their efforts of March and April and the British, the Commonwealth and the French forces – along with the newly-arriving American troops - were preparing for a counter-offensive on a grand scale. It would later become known to history as the *Hundred Days* and it was to be the advance which would months later bring an end to the *Great War*.

On the 17th 18th and 19th of July, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade made its way forward to the front lines and relieved the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The 3rd Brigade had spent the previous weeks to the rear and had been involved in training in ‘*open warfare*’ tactics. After some four years of stagnation, it was hoped that the war would at last now move out of the trenches.

The 13th Battalion, having been delegated to be a part of that Brigade Reserve, on July 18 was moved into the area of the ruined city of Arras which, up until that time, had been occupied by the 19th Canadian Infantry Battalion, the unit that the 13th was to relieve. The unit was subsequently billeted in the rue d’Amiens, in the few houses which were still standing and in cellars which had not collapsed.



(Right above: *The rue Saint-Géry in Arras, some seven hundred metres from the 13th Battalion billets and Headquarters in the rue d’Amiens - this picture taken in 1919, just after the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

On July 22 the unit marched from its billets across the city of Arras and through Beaurains. There it occupied an area in the country in which it could continue its training. Four days later again, the Battalion was once more on the move, now to relieve the 14th Battalion in the front line in the proximity of *Telegraph Hill*, this area to the south-east of Arras facing the Arras-Cambrai Road. On August 1 it was in turn relieved, the personnel surely by then speculating that they would be back before long – and not simply to remain in their trenches and dugouts.

The next six days were spent in busses, trains, on foot and in several communities in the *Pas-de-Calais* and the *Somme* as the 13th Battalion made its way in a semi-circular fashion - to the west then south of the city of Amiens - to the sector south of the main road from Amiens to Saint-Quentin*.



**This was some of the area taken during the German spring offensive four months previously.*

On August 7 it found itself in at *Hangard Wood*, a well-wired forest also populated by German trenches and – more particularly - machine-gun nests. *Hangard Wood* had also been designated as the first objective of the following morning’s assault.

(Preceding page: *Hangard Wood - Hangard Wood Cemetery just perceptible in the centre of the photograph - is also south of the modern east-west autoroute and of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Brétonneux. – photograph from 2014*)

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade Diary entry for August 8, 1917, reads partially as follows:

Heavy ground mist prevailed in the early part of the morning but later cleared and the day turned fine and warm.

At 4.20 a.m. the Brigade attacked the enemy positions in the neighbourhood of HANGARD WOOD on a three Battalion front in conjunction with the 2nd Canadian Division on the left and the 3rd Canadian Division on the right. The Brigade was disposed in the following formation:- ...13th Battalion Centre...

...All objectives were captured on time, being an advance of nearly three miles. The Brigade immediately reorganized and consolidated the position, whilst the 1st and then the 2nd Brigades leapfrogged and passed through, followed by the Cavalry. The Brigade captured HANGARD WOODS, East and West, HANGARD COPSE, WREN COPSE, STRIP COPSE, MORGOMONT WOOD, CROATES TRENCH and the village of AUBERCOURT, and the enemy guns in the area, amounting to 42... Vast numbers of prisoners, (1500-1800) were sent out and all kinds of stores captured.

The number of casualties incurred on that August 8 were not light: thirty-five killed in action, one-hundred seventy-five wounded, thirty missing in action*.



(Right top: *A German machine-gunner who also gave his all – from Illustration*)

(Right above: *Canadian infantry and cavalry sending prisoners to the rear – from Le Miroir*)

**According to the 13th Battalion War Diary, a goodly number of these were caused by Canadian artillery rounds falling short and among its own advancing infantry.*

The son of James Croak, miner, and Cecelia Croak, the family formerly of Little Bay, Newfoundland, before the parents and their first six children emigrated, in 1898, to New Aberdeen, Glace Bay in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, he was also brother to Pat, Maggie and Josephine, the three oldest, and to Mary, James and Michael*.

**The 1901 Canadian Census records the following ages: James (55), Cecelia (28), Pat (15), Maggie (13), Josephine (12), John (11), Mary – in 1901 (6), James (4); the 1911 Canadian Census, however, documents James (55), Cecelia (42), Margaret (20), Josephine (19), John (17), May – in 1911 (15), James (13) and Michael (6).*

Private Croak was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 8, 1917.

John Bernard Croak had enlisted at the age of twenty-three years and three months: date of birth (on enlistment papers) in Little Bay(?), Newfoundland, May 18, 1892.

Private John Bernard Croak was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



War Office,
27th September, 1918

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Victoria Cross to the undermentioned Officers, N.C.O.'s and Man:-

No. 445312 Pte. John Bernard Croak, late Quebec R.

“For most conspicuous bravery in attack when having become separated from his section he encountered a machine-gun nest which he bombed and silenced, taking the gun and crew prisoners. Shortly afterwards he was severely wounded, but refused to desist. Having re-joined his platoon, a very strong point, containing several machine-guns, was encountered. Private Croak, however, seeing an opportunity, dashed forward alone and was almost immediately followed by the remainder of the platoon in a brilliant charge. He was the first to arrive at the trench line into which he led his men, capturing three machine-guns and bayonetting or capturing the entire garrison, The perseverance and valour of this gallant soldier, who was again severely wounded and died of his wounds, were an inspiring example to all.” - from “Page 11430, Supplement of 27th September, 1918”, to “The London Gazette,” No. 30922, dated 24th September, 1918



The 13th Battalion War Diary entry of September 26, 1918, notes the awarding of the Victoria Cross to Private Croak*. In addition to the preceding citation, the following is also recorded: *Private Croak was again seriously wounded in the knee and died in a few minutes.*



On that same August 8, personnel of the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) of the Canadian Infantry also won a second Victoria Cross (Corporal H.J. Good, MC), one Distinguished Order and one Bar, eleven Distinguished Conduct Medals, and forty-three Military Medals and a single Bar*.

**A Bar signifies that this medal has been also been awarded on a previous occasion.*