

67925 SERJT. A.G. DUFFETT D.C.M.
CAN. MACHINE GUN CORPS
18. 10. 1916 AGE 29 749



Sergeant Albert George Duffett, DCM, Number 67925 of the Canadian Machine Corps* is buried in the Military Plot in Epsom Cemetery: Grave reference 749.

**In fact, the Canadian Machine Gun Corps did not come into being until April of 1917, six months after his death: Sergeant Duffett was a Non-commissioned Officer of the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Company at the time of both his woundings. At the time of his death he was on strength of the CCAC (Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre).*

His occupation prior to military service recorded as being that of an *engineer*, Albert George Duffett was in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the late autumn of 1914, for it was there that he presented himself for medical examination on November 9. Apparently it was not to be until three weeks after this that he both enlisted and attested, on November 30*, the date on which the Army began to remunerate him for his services. On that same day Private Duffett was attached to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.



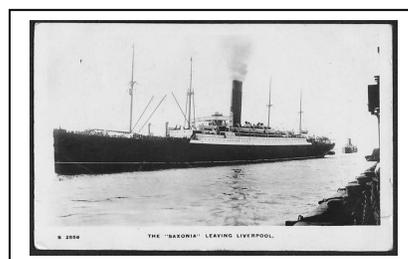
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**For some unexplained reason, the official overseeing the attestation has entered the date of November 28 on the same paper that records November 30.*

(Preceding page: The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps is from the canadiansoldiers.com Web-site.)

It was to be a further six months after Albert George Duffett's enlistment that the 25th Battalion embarked for overseas, the unit having trained at the Halifax Armouries during that period – although interrupted by an outbreak of diphtheria. By the end of those six months he had received promotion on two occasions: on December 29 of 1914 he had been appointed to the rank of lance corporal and, on February 16 of 1915, he had received his second stripe to the rank of (acting) corporal.

Corporal Duffett and his unit embarked onto the vessel *Saxonia* in Halifax on May 20 of 1915, the 25th Battalion travelling in the company of the 22nd Battalion from Québec and also with a part of the 2nd Division Ammunition Park, a total of some two-thousand three-hundred military personnel all told. *Saxonia* sailed on the same day, to dock in the English south-coast harbour and naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport, at ten minutes past four in the morning of May 29.



(Right above: The image of the Royal Mail Ship Saxonia leaving the port of Liverpool is from the Wikipedia web-site. Requisitioned by the British for government service she was deployed for use early in the conflict as a floating prisoner-of-war camp before seeing use as a troop transport as of 1915.)

The new arrivals apparently soon were on board trains which sped them across southern England to the county of Kent. There the Battalion proceeded to the large newly-forming Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* in the vicinity of the English-Channel port-town of Folkestone.



(Right: Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016)

Less than a month after his arrival in the United Kingdom, Corporal Duffett was sent to *Dibgate Camp* at nearby East Sandling, this also a subsidiary of the *Shorncliffe* establishment, where he was to participate in a machine-gun course and was temporarily *taken on strength* by the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade for the occasion.

On July 1 of that same 1915, he was *confirmed* to the rank of corporal before, only two months later, being appointed to the rank of sergeant. Twelve days later again, in mid-September, Sergeant Duffett was on his way to France.

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The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) was a component of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division. The Canadian Division* had been serving on the Continent since February of that year, in northern France and in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, where it had distinguished itself during the 2nd *Battle of Ypres* and in service at Festubert and Givenchy. By the late summer of 1915 it was now the turn of the 2nd Canadian Division to take a place in the line.

**Designated usually simply as the Canadian Division until, logically, the formation of the Canadian 2nd Division, when it then became the Canadian 1st Division.*

On September 15, the 25th Battalion marched from *Shorncliffe Camp* during the late afternoon en route for the harbour at Folkestone where the unit boarded a naval transport for the short crossing to the Continent. Sailing at ten o'clock that same evening, the troops disembarked in the French port of Boulogne two hours later, at one o'clock in the morning*.

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

**There is a one-hour time difference between the United Kingdom and France.*

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

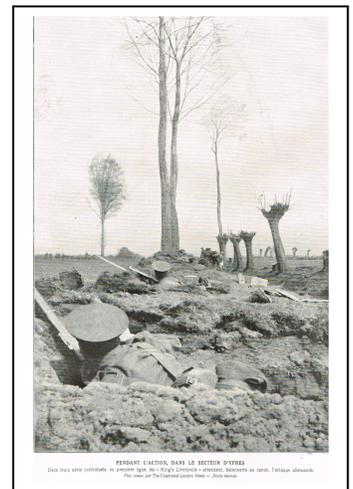
Later on that same day, September 16, and after a few hours rest, the 25th Battalion marched to meet a train which was to take them into northern France, not far from the frontier with Belgium, and not far distant from the large centre of Hazebrouk.

(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 surely early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)

By September 23, the Nova Scotia Unit was to be relieving the 2nd Battalion, *the King's Own*, in trenches close to the Franco-Belgian border in the area of the Kimmel-Ypres Road.

The War Diarist's entries for this early period document no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion. There was, nonetheless, already being recorded a small but steady stream of casualties due to enemy artillery and to his snipers.

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(Preceding page: Troops – in this instance British, the King’s Regiment (Liverpool) – 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 spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration)

The following months were to be a relatively quiet period for all the troops of both sides in the *Ypres Salient*; there was, of course, always that aforementioned trickle of casualties, but until April of 1916 there was to be only the daily grind of the infantryman’s life in – and out of – 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.*

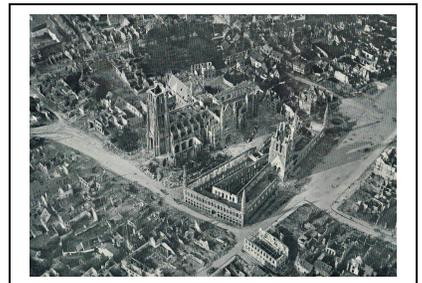


Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the year, 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and with the less-evident British-made Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

However, life in the trenches as a non-commissioned officer in the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) of the Canadian Infantry was to terminate for Sergeant Duffett on Christmas Day of that 1915. That was the day on which he was transferred to the Canadian 5th Infantry Brigade Machine Gun Company, to be *taken on strength* by that unit on Boxing Day.

The first few months of 1916 were mostly spent in training and instruction in the use of the American-made Colt machine guns. As time passed the unit was gradually introduced into the forward areas where the personnel prepared positions from which to use the ever-increasing number of those automatic weapons. As a company of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, it remained posted in the area just to the south of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres.



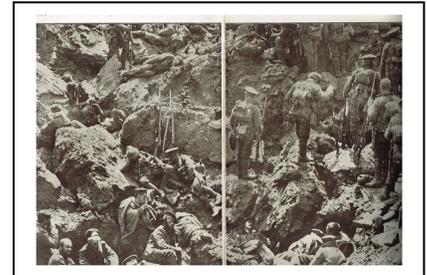
(Right above: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)

If Sergeant Duffett had remained with the 25th Battalion he would have by this time been involved in the Battalion’s – and the 2nd Division’s – first significant infantry operation.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division underwent its baptism of fire at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines placed in galleries which had been dug under the German lines; they then followed this with an infantry assault.

The units of the Canadian 2nd Division had been ordered to be prepared to then support the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence, were all to greet the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

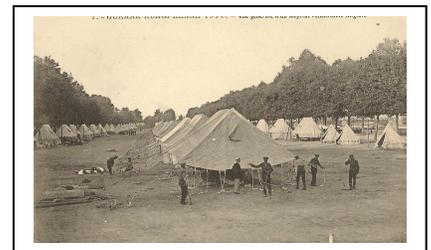


(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

However, as it was, Sergeant Duffett's 5th Infantry Brigade Machine-Gun Company, even though it was a unit of the Canadian 2nd Division, seems to have played no major role whatsoever in the *Action of the St. Eloi Craters*.

On April 26 the entire Company War Diary entry for the day reads: *Field – General instructional work – Foot inspection from 2-4 PM*. However, also on that day, Sergeant Duffett was in need of medical attention and was evacuated to the 4th Canadian Field Ambulance at Boeschepe, a community just to the south of the Franco-Belgian border.

One of forty-seven sick *other ranks* to be admitted for medical attention on that day, he was diagnosed as suffering from myalgia in his back and was thereupon forwarded to the 53rd (North Midland) Casualty Clearing Station at nearby Mont des Cats on that same April 26 for further treatment.



(Right: *a British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War – from a vintage post-card*)

Sergeant Duffett remained at the 53rd CCS for just over a week before being discharged back to *duty* with his unit on May 5.

A second medical incident was soon to befall Sergeant Duffett: Diagnosed as with PUO (*Pain or Pyrexia – fever – of Unknown Origin*), he passed through the Canadian 4th and 5th Field Ambulances on June 5, was transferred to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance* on the following day from where he was immediately forwarded to the Divisional Rest Station, likely run by the same 6th Canadian Field Ambulance.



Sergeant Duffett returned *to duty* with his Company three days later again, on June 9.

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

**All three of these Canadian field ambulances mentioned above were in the same area, the 4th and 5th at Reninghelst, the 6th at Boeschepe, all to the south of the Belgian town of Poperinghe.*

He had chosen an unpropitious moment to require medical treatment: although his unit, at least initially, was likely not to have been involved, the recently-arrived 3rd Canadian Division had been attacked in its sector of the *Ypres Salient*. The situation had soon become critical and it was not to be long before units of the other two Canadian Divisions were to play a role to a greater or lesser degree.



(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014*)

The confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* would be fought from June 2 to 14. The Canadians had apparently been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive, having overrun the forward areas and, in fact, having ruptured the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they had not exploited.



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

(Right: *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, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground.

Badly organized and inadequately supported, the operation was to be a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks had not been delivered – those that had, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy was to remain where he was, in captured Canadian positions, and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

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Ten days later the Canadians had again counter-attacked; on this occasion they had been better prepared and were to be better supported. The lost ground for the most part had been recovered, both sides had found themselves back where they had started – except for a small German gain at *Hooge* - and the cemeteries, alas, had been that much fuller.



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

Only six days after his return *to duty*, Sergeant Duffett was apparently once more in a forward area since the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Company War Diarist mentions him by name in his entry of June 15, 1916: *About 1.0 AM Sergeant Duffett of No 2 Section, captured 7 Germans who were in dug-outs in HALIFAX trench, three had been wounded by our bombardment, the others were in good health...*

Two days later again, on June 17, the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Company was serving in positions close to Zillebeke, and in fact in the area of the recent fighting to the south-east of Ypres, some of its personnel working in *Sanctuary Wood*.

Very little military action by either side was reported on that day, the...*Pedestal was erected on the old S.P. 13 emplacement, and guns brought from reserve at FOSSEWAY, and put in this position. Two German M.G.'s (sic) and a quantity of ammunition found deeply buried in mud, in SANCTUARY WOOD, these were dug out and carried to BOC(?). Casualties 1 O.R. (SHEEL SHOCK) (sic).*



The above is the complete Company War Diary entry for June 17; it will be seen not to correspond with what follows. Neither does that of June 18 below.

The Complete Company War Diary report of the following day, June 18, reads as follows: *Nothing of any note took place this date. Artillery and machine gun fire practically nil. Casualties 1 O.R. Wounded.*

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

The following is an excerpt from a medical report kept by the Horton County of London War Hospital in Epsom; it contains relevant information not to be found elsewhere among Sergeant Duffett's files:

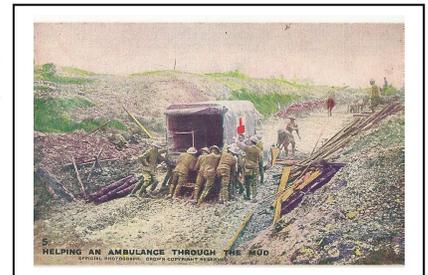
Admitted August 25 – 1916 from Canadian Convalescent Hospital Epsom

On admission patient seemed in good health and moved and spoke quite normally, but he complained of a constant succession of violent headaches when walking which quite prevented his doing anything. He stated that he had been wounded at Ypres on 17th June 1916 and operated on in an hospital at Popperinghe (sic) 21 June.

Naturally he had very confused ideas of what followed his wound. He was in the 3rd CCS Hospital* in France and the 18th General Hospital France and Colchester Military Hospital and one day in Woodcote Convalescent Hospital (whence he had been transferred to Horton).

***The 3rd CCS was at Puchevillers at the time, preparing for the expected casualties of the imminent First Battle of the Somme. Sergeant Duffett had likely been referring to the 3rd Canadian CCS which had been established at the Remy Sidings at Lijssenhoek, just south of Poperinghe, Belgium.**

(Right: transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and manpower – from a vintage post-card)



And yet June 17 must surely be the day on which Sergeant Duffett won his Distinguished Conduct Medal (see citation below and medical report above).

Sergeant Duffett had been wounded on the right side of the head, just above the right eye; some bone had been destroyed and the brain had been partially exposed – a depressed fracture and penetrating.

His other records merely document him as being admitted into the 18th General Hospital at Camiers on June 22, to remain there – and to be removed from the seriously ill list on July 1 – before being invalided back across the English Channel on board His Majesty’s Hospital Ship *Newhaven* on July 6.



(Right: The photograph of a peace-time *Newhaven* is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

Once returned to England, Sergeant Duffett had been transported to the General Military Hospital at Colchester*. There he was to remain until August 24 when he was considered well enough to be sent to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital (*Woodcote Park*) at Epsom where he had then remained but a single day before being forwarded to Horton.

His condition was in fact deteriorating rather than ameliorating.

***On paper Sergeant Duffett – once he had left the Continent - had been transferred from the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Company to the Canadian Casualty Assembly Centre at Folkestone, but this move was purely administrative.**

At Horton County of London War Hospital upon admission it was noted that... *there is a depressed pulsating scar... just above the right eye.* They operated on September 18 but the... *scalp became gangrenous.* Even so, it was felt that progress had been made.

But on October 2 the patient began vomiting and his temperature increased.

On October 6 his wound, oozing pus where the brain was still protruding, was thoroughly cleansed.

On October 18 Sergeant Duffett became unconscious, thought likely to be the result of... *deep cerebral hæmorrhaging*... and was reported as having *died of wounds* in the County of London War Hospital on that same October 18, 1916.

During his period of hospitalization, on August 7, Sergeant Duffett had been awarded the DCM (*Distinguished Conduct Medal**) likely for his service on June 17. Although the date of the action appears not to be noted on any document the available evidence suggests that this was indeed so.

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to the undermentioned Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers and men for acts of gallantry and devotion to duty in the field:-

...67925 Sjt. A.G. Duffett, Can. Mach. Gun Coy.

For conspicuous bravery while in charge of two machine guns – During a heavy bombardment he was buried by a shell, and although ordered to leave the trenches he remained on duty. Later he was wounded in the head by shrapnel, and again refused to leave his gun until compelled by the seriousness of his wounds. His splendid example at a critical time encouraged all ranks with him. – London Gazette Supplement of August 19, 1916, Number 29713



**British medals – they were awarded to all troops, British and Commonwealth – mostly fell into two categories: those for officers and those for enlisted ranks such as Sergeant Duffett. The Victoria Cross was the most notable exception to this rule – a discrimination which today no longer exists.*

The son of George Duffett, former fisherman before watchman at *Harvey & Co.* (deceased January 25, 1918) and of Mary Duffett (née *Diamond*)* – to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay as of June, 1915 – of 41 Spencer Street, St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Eva-Muriel, Simeon, Mabel, Evelyn, Alice-Maud and to Lilian.

**The couple, he a widower, is recorded as having married in Bay de Verde on November 11, 1883. His first wife, Susanna (née Eady) died December 15, 1880; the couple, married on November 27, 1873, had two children, William-James and Mary.*

Albert George Duffett had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-seven years and eleven months: date of birth in St. John's(?), Newfoundland, December 14, 1888 (from attestation papers); however, the Newfoundland Birth Register cites the birth – also December 14 - as having occurred in 1886 in the community of Bay de Verde.



(Right above: *A family monument commemorating the sacrifice of Albert George Duffett today stands in the Old Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road in the city of St. John's, Newfoundland. – photograph from 2015*)

Sergeant Albert George Duffett was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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.