



Private Francis (known as *Frank*) Joseph Fleming (at times *Flemming*) (Number 415878) of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 30-32.

(Right above: *The image of a cap badge of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

His occupation prior to military service recorded on his papers as that of a pipefitter, Frank Joseph Fleming may have been the young man listed among the passengers on the SS *Glencoe* on January 18, 1912, who on that day took passage from Port aux Basques, Dominion of Newfoundland, to North Sydney, Nova Scotia. On this occasion, papers document the young Frank Fleming as a fisherman/ labourer on his way to Sydney. (This information requires confirmation.)

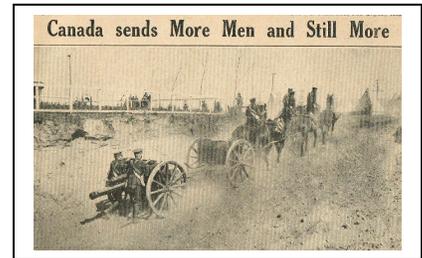
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However, it is certain that Frank Fleming both underwent a medical examination and enlisted in Halifax on August 6 of 1915. He then attested four days later, on August 10, as well as being... *finally approved and inspected* six days later again, by its commanding officer, and thus *officially* attached to the 40th Battalion (Nova Scotia) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force*. He had likely by that August 16 already joined his unit, by then in training at the newly-established *Camp Valcartier* in the province of Québec** and just to the north of Quebec City itself.

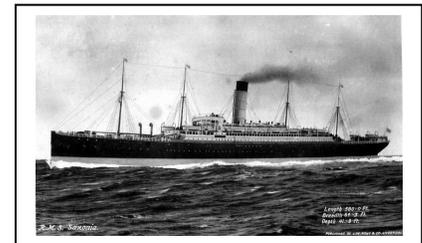
**His first pay records not only confirm the date of his enlistment but they also record him as having originally been taken on strength on that same August 6 by the 40th Battalion.*

***The 40th Battalion had been mobilized on May 11 of 1915 at Camp Aldershot in Nova Scotia and had undergone its early training there but it had then been relocated to Valcartier on June 21.*

(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 – but at some distance 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*)*



Two drafts from the 40th Battalion sailed before the parent unit itself crossed the Atlantic, but they were seemingly used upon arrival in England as re-enforcements for other units already serving on the Continent. It was on October 18, 1915, that Private Fleming and the main body of his Battalion took ship in the port of Québec – in the company of the 41st Battalion - onto His Majesty’s Transport *Saxonia*.



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

The vessel sailed on the same date, to dock in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport ten days later. The 40th Battalion was then transported by train to the Canadian military complex by then being established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott in the southern English county of Hampshire. Some sources apparently claim Private Fleming’s Battalion to have been the first Canadian unit stationed there.



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

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But for how long the unit *remained* posted at Bramshott is not clear: it apparently at some time soon afterwards became designated as a Reserve Battalion and was then transferred to the Kentish coast, to East Sandling*. When exactly this transfer came about seems undocumented, but it was before mid-February of 1916, as Private Fleming is recorded as being there on the 16th.

**East Sandling was a part of the Canadian military complex collectively designated as Shorncliffe. It is just down the coast from the sea-side town and harbour of Folkestone on the Dover Straits.*

Some four months after his arrival in England, on March 3, 1916, Private Fleming was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 40th Battalion as having been admitted into the Moore Barracks Hospital at Shorncliffe. Out walking, he had... *suddenly felt a pain in his back, a pain that, as he continued, progressed around to his chest, becoming more violent, as if he were being stabbed every three or four minutes* (Excerpt from Medical Report).

He had then fallen down, although retaining consciousness, but the pain had grown more intense. Thus he was admitted into hospital.

He remained there in hospital for eight days receiving medical attention. The pain had apparently receded after an hour or so, disappearing just as quickly as it had arrived. Subsequently subjected to batteries of tests which revealed nothing, Private Fleming was discharged on March 11, having finally being diagnosed as suffering from hysteria*.

**The medical definition of hysteria in those days differed somewhat from the one of today.*

(Right above: *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*)

Once back on duty there was little respite for Private Fleming as only four days later again, on March 15, - and having by then been apprised that he was now to be transferred to the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles* - he was on his way across the English Channel - likely passing via the English port-town of Folkestone and then Boulogne, its French counterpart on the opposite coast some two hours or so sailing-time distant.

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

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



****In the month of December of 1915 it had been decided to dismount the Mounted Regiments. Cavalry was finding less and less a role to play in the conflict – despite the biases of the High Command – thus the CMR units lost their horses and became regular infantry.***

However, the strength of a CMR regiment was little over fifty per cent of a bona fide infantry unit and so the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th CMR Regiments were chosen to remain intact and to become the four infantry battalions of the Canadian 3rd Division's 8th Infantry Brigade. The remaining CMR formations were then used as re-enforcements to bring the four fore-mentioned CMR regiments up to battalion strength. Thus the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th CMR Regiments became the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th CMR Battalions.

On the following day, March 16, Private Fleming reported to duty at the Canadian Base Depot which had by that time been established in the proximity of the French port-city of Le Havre, situated at the mouth of the River Seine. On the 18th he was despatched to his new unit *in the field* where he arrived one day later again.



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

Private Fleming's personal files record him as having reported to duty with the 5th CMR on that March 19 at a time when the Battalion was in the area of the northern French community of Meteren but preparing to leave on that same day for Camp "F", in the vicinity of the Belgian town of Poperinghe. For whatever the reason, the arrival of a draft from the Base Depot on that day is not noted in the 5th Battalion CMR War Diary – which, of course, does not *preclude* that re-enforcements *did* arrive.

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The 5th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, originally recruited in the area of the Eastern Townships of Québec, on January 1 of 1916 was to become a battalion (see * further above) of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade*, itself an element of the 3rd Canadian Division. The Division had begun to form in France in December of 1915, the 5th CMR having been on the Continent since October 24, some two months previously.

From that October of 1915 until the time of the arrival of Private Fleming's draft, the 5th CMR had been stationed in Belgium at the southern end of the front there, just before the trenches crossed over the frontier into France - Messines in the forward area and Locre to the rear are two place names which often appear in the Battalion War Diary - and then, latterly, as of March, in the *Ypres Salient*, just south-east of Ypres (today *leper*) itself. It was in these two sectors that the 5th CMR Battalion personnel were to learn about the rigours and the routines of life in – and out of – the trenches*.



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****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 the forward area, the latter 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 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

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Private Fleming had reported to duty at a time when the 5th Battalion, CMR, was already in the throes of changing sectors, transferring from a relatively quiet area into one that had already proved to be one of the most lethal of the entire *Great War*. Its new area of responsibility in the *Ypres Salient* was to comprise places in the south-east sector which the English-speaking troops had by that time variously designated as *Maple Copse*, *Hill 60*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Mount Sorrel*, as well as the once-village of *Hooge*.

There it was that the Canadian 3rd Division was to undergo its first major infantry action.

That confrontation was to take place some two months after the Battalion's transfer to the *Ypres Salient*, during the eleven-day period of June 2 until 13 of that 1916.

The Canadians had apparently 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 for the 3rd Canadian Division, they never exploited.



(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)

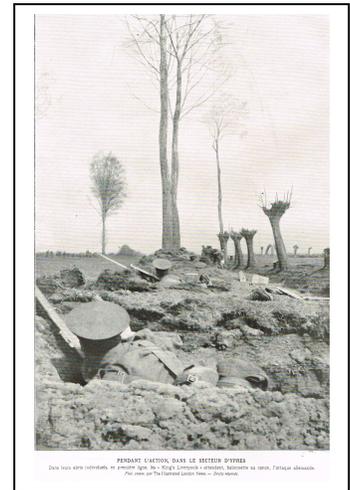


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On that June 2, the day of the German attack, the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles was serving in Brigade Support at *Maple Copse*, having been there since the night of May 31-June 1.

The following are excerpts taken from the War Diary of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifle Battalion entry of June 2, 1916: *A red letter day in the history of the Battalion, ever to be remembered by those who lived through it. In the early morning, enemy sprung a mine in part of line held by 4th CMR Battalion and began a bombardment of the Brigade area... and all the ground in MAPLE COPSE and vicinity. The men were kept under cover as much as possible...*

(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*)



...Several attempts were made to get in touch with the front line but without success. Runners sent out by us... were killed or returned wounded, with news that the communications trenches had been blown in, and that it was impossible to get through enemy barrage fire...

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



What exactly was the role that Private Fleming played on that day of June 2, 1916, does not appear to have been documented.

(Right: *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*)



(Right below: *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*)



The son of John Fleming, fisherman, and of Caroline Fleming (née *Tobin*?) – to whom, on February 11, some four months previous, he had willed his all – of St. Vincent's*, St. Mary's Bay, he was also brother to (at least) Tobias, to William, to Stanislaus, Vince, Ethel, Charles, Mary and John.

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Private Fleming was reported as having been *killed in action* on June 2, 1916, during the first day of the fighting at *Mount Sorrel*. (The date of death had previously incorrectly been documented as *July 2, 1916*.)

Francis (*Frank*) Joseph Fleming had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years: date of birth at St. Vincent's, St. Mary's Bay, Newfoundland, September 2, 1892.

Private Frank Joseph Fleming was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 26, 2023.

