

(Previous page: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

**Inscription on stele above left on previous page: To the memory of these 56 soldiers of the British Empire killed in action in 1915-1918 and buried at the time in...Lens Canadian Cemeteries No. 2 and No. 3...whose graves were destroyed in later battles.*

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a fisherman, there appears to be no available documentation a propos his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. However, by 1915 he already had found his way to the coastal town of Digby, for it was in that year that he married a Miss Vesta Lottie McGrath from Victoria Beach, Annapolis County*.

**For that period in history, the wedding ceremony was a bit of a curiosity: a Roman Catholic bride-groom, a Baptist bride, and the rites undertaken in an Anglican Church under the guidance of a Church of England minister.*

It was also in the community of Digby that Austin Arthur Foley enlisted, on January 7, 1916, the same day as on which he was *taken on strength* by the 112th Overseas Infantry Battalion (Nova Scotia) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force – the formation of the Battalion itself having been authorized only some sixteen days previously. However, he was apparently not to undergo medical examination until March 4, and then not to attest until March 13.

The 112th Battalion trained during that winter and spring of 1916 in, and in the vicinity of, the town of Windsor. Then on July 23, having travelled the short distance to Halifax, the unit boarded His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister-ship to *Britannic* – to be sunk in the Mediterranean in November of that same year – and also of the ill-fated *Titanic*. She was one of the largest ships afloat at the time, able to easily carry more than six-thousand troops – which she oft-times did.



(Right above: *The photograph of Olympic, shown here in her war-time dazzle camouflage, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Private Foley was not to take passage to the United Kingdom alone: apart from his own unit, travelling on *Olympic* were the 103rd, 109th, 115th and 116th Battalions of Canadian Infantry; the 4th Draft of the Canadian Mounted Rifles Depot; the 1st Draft of both the 65th and 71st Batteries of the Canadian Field Artillery; and the 2nd and 3rd Drafts of the 11th TD (*Training Depot?*) of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. Likely added to them were other miscellaneous personnel, for a total of not far off six-thousand souls.

Clearing the harbour in Halifax on July 24, HMT *Olympic* docked a week later in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on the last day of the month. Nine days later again she was returning to Halifax, repatriating returning soldiers.

(continued)

From Liverpool the 112th Battalion was transported immediately by train to a Canadian Camp, this one newly-established in the vicinity of the villages of Bramshott and Liphook in the southern English county of Hampshire. There Private Foley and his comrades-in-arms were to remain for the following four months to complete their training while awaiting further orders to proceed from there to the Continent and on to the Western Front.



(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*)

On November 27-28, 1916, a re-enforcement draft from the 112th Battalion was transferred by ship, likely through the English port of Southampton, to its French counterpart, Le Havre, on the estuary of the River Seine. There it reported to the nearby Canadian General Base Depot. Private Foley's detachment was also transferred, this time on paper, from the 112th Battalion to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) already serving on the Continent.



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

Having reported temporarily *to duty* to the General Base Depot at Le Havre on November 29*, Private Foley was despatched two days later to the 2nd Entrenching Battalion**. Two days later again, on December 3, the records show him as having joined the parent unit of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) in the field.

**As did eleven-hundred fifty-seven other arrivals from the United Kingdom on that day. Eleven-hundred nine left the Base Depot, as did Private Foley, on December 1 but, of course, to a number of units.*

***In the early days of the conflict, infantry battalions had dug their own trenches, ditches and whatever else needed to be excavated. It proved not to be a very efficient method of getting things done, thus specialized units were created, drafting men of the right physique and stamina, and also those who had had experience in that sort of work. When these battalions were disbanded, many of the personnel were transferred to engineering units.*

These entrenching battalions were often strategically positioned behind the front lines – where there was always construction work to do – but were also prepared to move up to the forward area as and when needed. Thus they were deemed to be useful as re-enforcement pools where drafts could be sent from Base Depot to work until such time as the combat units were ready to receive the new arrivals.



(continued)

(Previous page: *Canadian sappers here doing the specialized work of road-building in the spring of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

The 25th Battalion War Diary entry for December 3 makes no mention of re-enforcements arriving on that day – although this does not preclude the possibility of a draft having done so. At the time much of the Battalion was in rest billets at Bully-Grenay, a commune some eight kilometres to the north-west of the city, and mining centre, of Lens, the unit having retired from the forward area only the day before.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some fifteen months by this time, since September of the year 1915. It was a unit of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the Western Front.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It was at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on 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 had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on or about April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25th Battalion had relieved another unit and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date.

(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

Six weeks later, in early June, the Battalion had been involved in the fighting in the area of *Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts, Hill 60* and *Maple Copse*, all just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division had played a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle honour won by the unit during the Great War.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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)



(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)

From the middle of June up until August of 1916, 20, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14. Some two weeks later, on the 27th, the unit was withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moule.

The following week at Moule had been spent in becoming familiar with the British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.



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 span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

(Right above: *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*)

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 was to lose 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 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



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

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the Brickfields (*La Briqueterie*) in the proximity of the provincial town of Albert.

On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

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

(Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916): *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcellette... the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who went over *the top* on the day of the assault, the War Diary has recorded thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.

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

**It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenched known as KENORA and REGINA... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right above: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)



On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and made its way westwards and then northwards. It had subsequently passed to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. There the unit was to remain for the following four months in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay – where Private Foley reported to *duty* during that December - Angres and Bruay.



(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

* * * * *

That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25th Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare; after *the Somme* it was perhaps a welcome respite. Of course, for Private Foley it would have been a new experience*.

**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 the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration*)

Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the Battalion was withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, there to undergo intensive training. The exercises were to last until, and including, April 7, only two days before the training was to become the real thing. On the final five days, April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked.

On April 8... *Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route...* (Battalion War Diary). It apparently did not pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

On April 9 in that spring 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 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 overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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, stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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

The Canadian 2nd Division had not been responsible for the taking of Vimy Ridge itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack.

The Battalion's objectives were apparently soon captured and much of the remainder of the day was spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.



(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd 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*)



(Right: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)



(continued)

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



(Right above: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)

There had been, on the first days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day’s success proved to be logistically impossible.

Thus the Germans were gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* 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. At the time that the battle officially drew to its conclusion, the 25th Battalion was in reserve, resting and training – if that is not a contradiction – in the vicinity of the community of Gouy-Servins, to the west of the city of Lens.

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 his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



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

(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Miroir*)

One of the first primary objectives of the Canadian campaign was to be *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

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.

(continued)

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

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.

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: *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)



Of course, the Germans were not the only ones to incur casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion retired on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*, fifty of which were apparently incurred on that August 17.



(Right: *The spoils of war: Canadian officers and men on some of the terrain on which they had recently fought – and captured – from Le Miroir*)

The day was partially spent by some companies in preparing to withdraw to the rear; others were to remain *in situ*. Carrying-parties were organized for bringing ammunition and bombs (grenades) to the front and a further party was detailed to carry dead to the cemetery. Unfortunately it is not recorded what exactly were the duties of Private Foley on that particular date.

Casualty report: *Whilst on duty in a front line trench in the vicinity of Lens he was instantly killed by the explosion of an enemy shell nearby.*

The son of Jacobus (*James*) Foley, fisherman, and Rose Foley (née *Tobin*) of Little Barasway, Placentia, Newfoundland*, he was also husband to Vesta** – to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay as of August 1, 1916, and also willed his all as of October 11, 1916. Private Foley and his wife were parents to Bridget and to Austin-James of Victoria Beach, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia.



(Right: *The photograph of Private Foley is from the Ancestry.ca web-site.*)

Private Foley was recorded as having been *killed in action* on August 17, 1917, while serving in the trenches near to the city of Lens.

**He was also brother to Ellen-May, to Peter-Joseph, Agnes-Joseph, Joseph, James, Patrick, Thomas, Esther, Theresa-Joseph, Mary-Bridget, to Anna and to Douglas-Joseph.*

***Vesta Foley apparently re-married on April 4, 1918, to become Everitt.*

(Right: *The sacrifice of Private Foley is honoured on the War Memorial in Placentia – photograph from 213*)



Austin Arthur Foley had enlisted at the *apparent age* of thirty years and five months: date of birth in Little Barasway, Newfoundland, November 23, 1886. (There is, obviously, a year's discrepancy – presumably, in this case, a clerical error.)

Private Austin Arthur Foley was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

