

Private William Henry Follett (Number 67428) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel 26-30.

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

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a teamster, William Henry Follett leaves behind him little available information a propos his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia*. All that apparently may be asserted is that he was present in Halifax for attestation and for a medical examination on November 26 of 1914.

**Ancestry.ca* has several entries under the name *William Follett*, but none is detailed enough to affirm that this is the person that we seek.

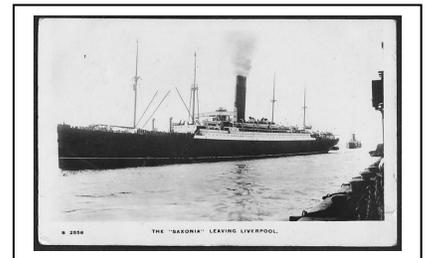
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It would appear that November 11 of 1914 was the day on which William Henry Follett enlisted – at least, his first pay-records show that is the date on which the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services. He would seem at that time to have been attached to the 94th Regiment of Militia for a very short period, for two days according to what he wrote on his attestation papers, but when this exactly was is not clear – perhaps immediately upon his enlistment?

Those first pay records – which confirm the date of his enlistment – also have him *taken on strength* by the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) on the same day before being... *finally approved and inspected...* by the Battalion's Commanding Officer on December 1, 1914. This unit was to be the one with which Private Follett was to spend the remainder of his military career.

It was to be a further six months after William Henry Follett's enlistment that the 25th Battalion embarked for *overseas service*, the unit training at the Halifax Armouries during that period – although this was interrupted by an outbreak of diphtheria.

Private Follett and his unit embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia* in Halifax on May 20 of 1915. The 25th Battalion was to be travelling in the company of the 22nd Battalion, Canadian Infantry, from Québec, and also with a detachment of the 2nd Division Ammunition Park, a total of two-thousand two-hundred seventy-four military personnel all told taking passage to the United Kingdom.



Saxonia sailed on the same May 20, 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 boarded trains which were to speed them across southern England to East Sandling Camp, a part of the large Canadian military complex then being established at Shorncliffe, in the vicinity of the English Channel port-town of Folkestone in the county of Kent.



(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*)

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) during the period of its *active service* was a component of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 2nd Division.

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The Canadian (1st) Division* had been serving on the Continent since February of 1915, mostly having been deployed in northern France and in the *Kingdom of Belgium***, and had distinguished itself during the *2nd Battle of Ypres* in the spring of that year. By the late summer of 1915 it was now the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to take a place in the line.

**The formation was designated simply as the Canadian Division until, logically, the Canadian 2nd Division made its appearance.*

***It had notably been engaged in late April of 1915 in the 2nd Battle of Ypres in Belgium and almost immediately afterwards in northern France, in the confrontations at Festubert and Givenchy.*



On September 15, the 25th Battalion left Shorncliffe Camp in the late afternoon to march to the harbour at Folkestone where the unit boarded ship 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.*

Later on that same day, September 16, and after a few hours rest, the Battalion marched to meet transport which was to take them east some sixty-five kilometres, not far from the frontier with Belgium, and not far distant from the large centre of Hazebrouck.



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

(Right: 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)

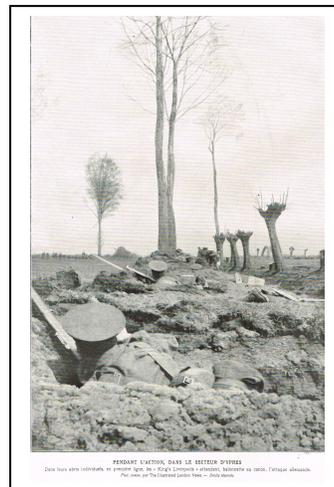


By September 23, the Nova Scotia Unit was relieving the 2nd Battalion, the King's Own, in trenches close to the Franco-Belgian border in the area of the Kemmel-Ypres Road.

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, a steady trickle of casualties, usually due to artillery fire and to snipers, but until the spring of 1916 there was to be only the daily grind of the infantryman's life in – and out of – the trenches*.

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(Right: Troops – in this instance British, the King's Regiment (Liverpool) – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. Once again, 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)



**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.*

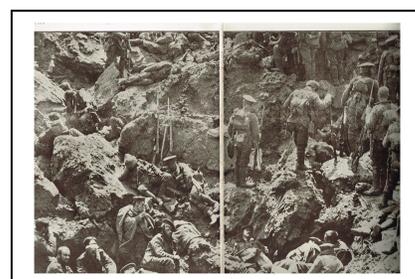
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

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



The rigours and routines of the everyday pattern of trench warfare continued for the 25th Battalion until the month of April, 1916. Then it became involved, although not to the same degree as were many other units of the Canadian 2nd Division on whom much of the ensuing engagement was to devolve. The incident became known as the *Action – or Battle - of the St-Éloi Craters*.

It had begun on March 27 when the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had followed up with an infantry assault. All had not, however, gone as planned: the British attack became bogged down, not least of all because of the problem of crossing the craters caused by its own mines - they had then become filled with water due to the incessant rain. The troops often fought immersed up to their waists.



(Right above: An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, possibly at St-Éloi – from Illustration)

On April 3 it was the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to enter the fray, relieving the by-then exhausted British troops. Fighting under the same abominable conditions, they, like the British, found that the shattered landscape little resembled what they had been told to expect.

And they, as had their British comrades-in-arms, floundered and lost their way as the German defences daily grew ever-more resolute and their incessant artillery fire grew ever more in strength.

The fighting was to linger on into the fourth week of April by which time the Canadians alone were to have lost almost fifteen-hundred men and all for nought: the Germans by then had won back all that had been lost.

In the meantime, the 25th Battalion had still been *standing to*, ready for action on April 7; but it was not to move into the forward area until April 12, there to occupy alternatively front lines and support positions, and to relieve some of the troops in the craters.

The entire 25th Battalion War Diary entry of April 13 reads as follows: *Very heavy shelling, on craters occupied by us, and on our front and support trenches*

The son of Elijah Follett, fisherman, and of Miriam Follett (née King) of Western Bay, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Edith-Blossom, to James-Kennell, Janie-Evelyn, John-Ernest, Mary-Abigail, Reuben, and to Samuel-Browning.



Private Follett was reported as having been *killed in action while with a bombing party* on April 13, 1916, during the fighting of the day at the St-Éloi Craters.

(Above right: *A memorial erected by his parents and which stands in Western Bay Old United Church Cemetery, commemorates the life and sacrifice of William Henry Follett – photograph from 2011(?)*)

William Henry Follett had enlisted at the *apparent age* of eighteen years: declared date of birth at Western Bay, Newfoundland, July 18, 1895. However, the parish records of the time apparently cite July 20, 1894.

Private William Henry Follett 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).



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.