

Private George Edward Forsey (Number 113222) of the 4th 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 30-32.

(Right above: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 4th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a clerk, George Edward Forsey appears to have left no verifiable documentation of his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Ontario. However there *are* records that he underwent a medical examination in Toronto on July 21 of 1915 and, according to his first pay-records commencing as of that same day, that he enlisted and was *taken on strength* by the 8th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles*.

**It may be that he chose a mounted unit – or it was chosen for him - as his medical report discloses that he was flat-footed.*

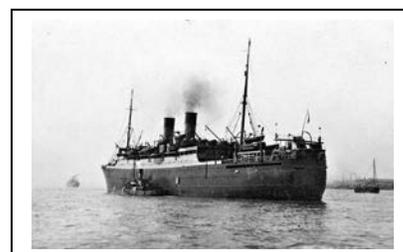
Three days later, on July 24, Trooper Forsey underwent attestation – at a quarter past two in the afternoon - in the community and/ or camp of Barriefield (today a heritage village) in the surrounds of the military town of Kingston.

Kingston was at the time one of the recruiting centres for the 8th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles and it was by the officer commanding that particular unit that Private Forsey was *...finally approved and inspected...* three days later again, on July 27*. Barriefield Camp (today *Canadian Forces Base Kingston*) was then to be the site where the unit – and thus Trooper Forsey - underwent the majority of its training.

**Whether that was the date on which he was attached to “C” Squadron appears not to have been documented.*

It was on October 9, 1915 – a second source says October 8 – that the unit’s thirty-one officers and six-hundred one *other ranks* sailed from Montreal, having just beforehand passed through Ottawa to be reviewed by the Governor-General, the Duke of Connaught.

The ship on which the 8th Regiment, CMR, embarked was the *Canadian Pacific Line* vessel *Missanabie*. Also on board taking passage to the United Kingdom were the 12th Regiment of the CMR, plus the 2nd Draft of the 40th Battalion and the 3rd Draft of the 79th Battalion of Canadian Infantry. Ten days later *Missanabie* docked in the English south-coast naval port of Devonport-Plymouth, on October 19 - a second source says the 18th.



(Right above: *The photograph of the SS Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Whatever that date of debarkation may have been, upon its arrival in England the 8th Regiment was entrained to the fledgling Canadian Military Camp in the vicinity of the villages of Bramshott and Liphook in the southern English county of Hampshire, and was reported as still being there on November 5, the day of a muster parade.



(Above right: *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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This parade may have been the precursor of a transfer – made on some undocumented date - to the Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* being established in the county of Kent and adjacent to the English-Channel port town of Folkestone. There the unit was to remain until its departure for overseas service to the Continent.



(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*)

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



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



Despatch to France occurred on January 28-29 of the New Year, 1916. The 8th Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles, was transferred, on paper, to the 4th Battalion of the (see*below), Canadian Mounted Rifles and, by sea, to the Continent and thence to the Western Front – likely via Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on the opposite coast and only hours' sailing-time distant.

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



From Boulogne the unit reported to the Canadian Base Depot further down the French coast in the proximity of the French port-city of Le Havre. On that date the Depot reported having received only four-hundred twenty-nine arrivals, so it would seem that those re-enforcements did not include the *entire* 8th Regiment. By that time however, the 8th Regiment *had* been bureaucratically – officially - transferred to the 4th Battalion*.

**In the previous month of December 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 – including the 8th - 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.*

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A like number of re-enforcements – four-hundred sixty-five – then arrived, also from *Shorncliffe*, on the following day. The Canadian General Base Depot entry for the day reads as follows: *Draft of 465 Other ranks arrived from Shorncliffe (all C.M.R's). This draft was very badly equipped. 351 Jackets had to be exchanged; and 117 pairs of Boots also had to be exchanged (a few pairs were unserviceable). 60 men had no A.F.W3066(?) pasted in their Pay-Books. 262 men had rifles but no bayonets. 408 Woolen vests had to be issued as a Free-Issue.*

The entire entry of the Canadian Base Depot War Diary for February 2, the day that Private Forsey left the CGBD to join the parent unit of the 4th CMR repeats the theme: *Draft of 830 other ranks C.M.R.s left for the front with 9 conducting officers. This was without exception the worst equipped draft from England**.

**As will be seen, this draft was not destined to join only a single unit.*

Private Forsey is documented as having reported *to duty* with the 4th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles on February 10, having travelled north to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier from Le Havre.

The parent unit of the 4th CMR which Private* Forsey joined was at the time undertaking a tour in the front lines in the south of the Belgian province of West Flanders, from February 7 to 13. The 4th Battalion CMR War Diary reports no arrivals on this date; however, on the 9th, the day before... *Draft of 300 men received and held in battalion reserve. 15 men are to be sent in each night to each company in the trenches and held for 24 hours...*

**It also appears that former troopers, as of January 1, 1916, were now privates.*

* * * * *

The parent unit of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles had disembarked in the port at Boulogne – all but its transport which had passed through Le Havre - on the evening of October 24, 1915, some months before, and two days later had entrained for the one-hundred thirteen kilometre – yet still five-hour – railway journey to the northern French town of Bailleul.

The unit had there remained *in situ* until November 2 when it had been ordered eastward to the town of Neuve-Église before turning north to cross the border into Belgium, there to billet at *Aldershot Camp**.



(Right above: *The northern French town of Bailleul, rebuilt after the Great War, and as it was almost a century after the 4th CMR passed through – photograph from 2010*)

**There were at least two other Aldershot Camps at that time which would have been known to Canadian troops: the large British military complex in southern England, and also the Canadian Army and Militia training facility in Nova Scotia.*

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On the following day its companies begun to move by rote for short, twenty-four hour tours in the front lines, there to gain a first-hand experience 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, but by that time equipped with steel helmets and also the less-evident British-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)



The Battalion had retired on November 10 and much of the remainder of that month and most of December had been spent relatively peacefully behind the lines. As the days passed, much time had been allotted to parades of all types interspersed with the occasional game of football and sometimes a bath - but reports of any horses were soon no longer to be found in the Battalion War Diary.

By now it was becoming progressively evident that the once-mounted troopers were to soon operate as foot soldiers: on December 31 of 1915 the War Diary reported... *Infantry instruction now commences for all ranks. General Alderson talks to all officers on subject of change of establishment. This Regiment is now in the 8th Can. Infantry Bgde. And is in the 3rd Canadian Division**.

**The Canadian 3rd Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31 of 1915 and January 1, 1916.*

The winter of 1915-1916 was to pass in that manner, both before and after the appearance of Private Forsey on the scene. Apart from the routine patrols and the occasional raids – by both sides – there was little to report in the way of infantry activity; most casualties that came about were due to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers.

There was, further down the line, towards the end of March – the 27th - and up until the third week in April – the 17th - the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*; this primarily involved British and then Canadian troops, but these were to be troops of the Canadian 2nd Division - and, of course, there was also the German Army.

The Canadian 2nd Division had been serving in the sector since the previous September, yet this was to be the baptism of fire for its units. For troops eager to prove themselves in battle, it was to prove a bitter experience.

The confrontation had begun when the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had then had followed this with an infantry attack. The Canadian 2nd Division was then some days later to build on the presumed British success, to hold and to consolidate all the newly-won territory.



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

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6.

After some two weeks of fighting the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

But of course, the 4th Battalion CMR of the Canadian 3rd Division, had not been involved. By that time it was posted in the area of Sanctuary Wood, in the south-east sector of the *Ypres Salient*, and not far removed from the battered – even by that time – remnants of the medieval city of Ypres itself.



Its baptism of fire was yet to come before which a further six weeks were yet to pass.



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

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least – to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.



(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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The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while appeared to have breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences.



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

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, 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: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations – photograph from 2014*)

But even before the misadventures of June 3, Private Forsey had become a casualty.

Excerpts from the 4th Battalion CMR War diary entry for June 2, 1916: *The enemy put over about 20 or 30 trench mortars about 7 a.m... At 8.30 a.m. the enemy commenced a bombardment... The bombardment increased, and we were bombarded in the front line, supports, and reserves by thousands of shells of every description... The front line was also bombarded by trench mortars. The O.C. of the platoon in S.P. 12 held his position until about 11.30 a.m. when he sent out his remaining men who were mostly wounded, and when his last man had left, came out himself.*



A mine exploded on the battalion front about 1 p.m. and an order came down the line to withdraw. At this time the whole front line was flattened out and there were no trenches of any description, and very few of the battalion that were able to carry on.

(Right above: *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*)

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...The SIC (sergeant-in-command?) gathered about 20 men together and started for Maple Copse where the supporting battalion was situated. When he reached the copse he had only 3 men with him, the others having become casualties through enemy shell, machine-gun, and rifle fire. He was given permission to take up six men and try and discover news of the battalion. He remained for two hours...but could get no news of any men... During the afternoon and evening of the 2nd about 45 men reported...from the front and support lines.

Casualty report: Killed in Action – Vicinity of Maple Copse

The son of Joshua Forsey, deceased 1898, and of Esther Forsey (née Bennett, re-married Gregory) of Grand Bank, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Aaron-Angus, to Sarah and to Hedley*. Private Forsey, originally designated as *missing in action*, was then reported later that same day as having been *killed in action* during the fighting at *Mount Sorrel* on June 2, 1916.

*On a card in his personal file is noted: Also notify, Edward Patten, 109 Matchmount Rd. Toronto, Ont. – **There are no further details as to the identity of this person.**

(Right: The sacrifice of Private George Edward Forsey is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the community of Grand Bank. - photograph from 2015)



George Edward Forsey had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-three years and eleven months: date of birth in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, September 30, 1892.

Private George Edward Forsey was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

