



**Pioneer Norman Stewart Fowlow (Number 167041) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, lies in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, Belgium: Grave reference V.D.38A.**

*(Right: The image of the badge of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers is from the Militarybadgcollection.com web-site.)*

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of an engineer, Norman Stewart Fowlow appears to have left no documentation pertinent to his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia except to record that he had served as Private Fowlow in the 78<sup>th</sup> Pictou Regiment (*Highlanders*)\* of the Canadian Militia for a period of two years.

*\*This unit recruited primarily in the Nova Scotian counties of Colchester and Hants.*

He, however, is also documented as being in the area of Sydney Mines, Cape Breton, on November 20, 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted. He then attested five days later, on November 25, and presented himself for medical examination on the 26<sup>th</sup>, all of the above being certified by a magistrate on the final day of that month.

In Pioneer Fowlow's personal files there now appears to be a likely error in his documentation: The unit to which he was *officially* attached, two weeks later again on December 16, when he was ...*finally approved and inspected...* by the officer commanding the unit, was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Pioneers\*.

*\*His first pay records, apart from confirming his enlistment on that November 20, also document that he was taken on strength on that same date by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers.*

However, by the recorded date of December 16, *that* unit had already sailed for the United Kingdom – *and* Pioneer Fowlow's other records place him on board the ship. One must therefore perhaps surmise that the date of his audience with the C.O. of - and his *official* attachment to - the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, must have been December 6, not 16, and that he joined his new unit at dock-side in Halifax. There appears to be nothing further recorded on the subject.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion, originally authorized in Guelph, had been mobilized throughout Ontario during that summer of 1915. Despatched to travel overseas, the unit had left Guelph on November 16 and passed through Ottawa – there to be inspected by the Duke of Connaught, Governor General of Canada at that time - on its way to Québec where it had arrived on the 18<sup>th</sup>.

Having then undergone further training in - or in the vicinity of - Québec from that date until December 4, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneers had boarded a train on that evening for the overnight railway journey to the east-coast port of Halifax.

On December 6 the *Pacific Steam Navigation Company* steamer SS *Orduna*\* took on board Pioneer Fowlow and his Battalion\*\* in Halifax harbour and sailed for the United Kingdom later on that same day. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, ten days later again, the vessel berthed in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport.

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



(continued)

*\*Certain vessels were requisitioned during the War by the government to transport military personnel and related supplies and thus were designated HMT – His Majesty’s Transport – but others (apparently Orduna is an example) were simply leased for the occasion when the need arose, at times even complying with the vessel’s commercial schedule.*

*\*\*There appear to be no available records of any other units which may have taken passage on the same ship at the same time.*

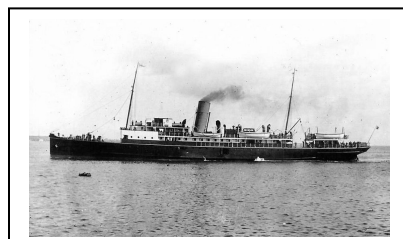
At eleven o’clock on the morning of December 14, the twenty-eight officers and one-thousand forty *other ranks* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion boarded a train which transported them towards the venerable English cathedral city of Winchester in the county of Hampshire.

Once having de-trained, the unit marched to the military encampment at Hazely Down where it was now to remain for some twelve weeks. It was at Hazely that perhaps the sole blemish of his military career was to appear on Pioneer Fowlow’s service record: he was docked a single day’s pay for being *Absent Without Leave* for an uncited period - or reason - on January 16, 1916.

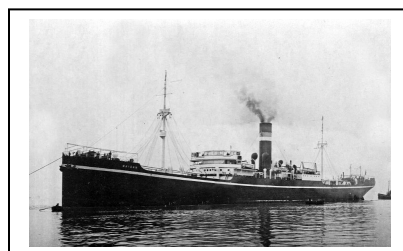


*(Right above: Troops marching at a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp on an uncertain date during the winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated)*

On March 7, 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion took ship in the English south-coast port of Southampton: on board the *Caesarea* were twenty-two officers and five-hundred fourteen *other ranks*; eight officers and two-hundred forty-eight *other ranks* travelled on *Maidan*, this ship also carrying the Battalion’s transport and stores.



On the following morning, March 8, the two ships docked in Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. Onto which vessel Pioneer Fowlow had embarked is not documented.



However, if it were *Caesarea*, then, upon arrival in Le Havre, he was to spend the remainder of the day in a rest camp; if otherwise, Private Fowlow was to spend the next number of hours helping to unload everything that *Maidan* carried.



*(Right above: The images of Caesarea (top) and Maidan are both from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

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

At midnight on the same day, the Pioneers entrained and travelled north to the town of Bailleul on the Franco-Belgian border. It was a journey which took them some twenty-two hours, their travels subsequently terminating with a ten-kilometre march to *Scherpenberg Barracks* where the unit arrived at three o’clock in the morning on March 10.

The work of a pioneer battalion was unlike that of a regular battalion and each Canadian division had its own Pioneer battalion\*. The Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion was attached to the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division upon its arrival on the Continent in March 1916 and thus was stationed in Belgium with the Division during the earlier days of its war.

*\*All the Canadian Pioneer battalions except the 2<sup>nd</sup> had ceased to exist by the end of the year 1917, disbanded and absorbed by other units, often those of the Canadian Engineers. The same fate befell the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in May of 1918.*

Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction and repairing, and also the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like\*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his physique and also for his experience in such work.



(Right above: *The caption of the image, translated, reads: Canadian sappers building a road somewhere... 'in liberated territory' – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

*\*In fact, much of the work done was also the responsibility at times of the Engineers.*

Often working under fire, the Pioneers shared the dangers of life at the front with all the other troops which were stationed there and were at times obliged to act as regular infantry. On March 27, 'B' and 'C' Companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion, during a German counter-attack at St-Éloi, were... *in trenches. Took part in operations connected with the action... Casualties "B" Company 1 killed, 8 wounded, "C" Company 1 killed, 2 wounded.* (Excerpt from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion War Diary)



(Right above: *Perhaps staged, a photograph of the aftermath of the action... of the St-Éloi Craters? – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

A further short extract from the same Battalion War Diary, this entry from April 15, 1916, a month after the unit's arrival in Belgium, may give an idea of the work involved during a typical day for 'C' Company: *Finished the excavation of 7 dugouts, dug the entry trench to the 8<sup>th</sup> dugout, drained the 9<sup>th</sup> dugout, filled 2500 sandbags. Filled in the straight trench at the traverse. Returned to camp at 2.30 a.m.*

And while it is true that the Pioneer battalions had been formed to perform duties different from those of the regular infantry units, their way of life and the routine of the trenches was oft-times very similar\*.

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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 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, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets – from Illustration)*



It was the practice to encourage soldiers leaving on overseas service or active service to allot a certain daily, weekly or monthly amount from their pay to a beneficiary of their choice. As of April of 1916, Pioneer Fowlow, began to allocate a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - that at the time being one dollar and ten cents per diem – to his mother, Mrs. Mary Ann Fowlow.

There appears to be no record of him leaving a will – in many cases one may suppose that the poorer of the young soldiers had little or nothing to bequeath.

Dickebusch is today still a small community to the south-west of the city of Ypres. In 1916, during the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion's tenure there, its civilian population had likely been evacuated; certainly little of the village remained standing. In the vicinity of Dickebusch was *Camp 'A'*, in a rear area, but well within the range of German artillery so the War Diarist reports. The *Camp* became the base for the Battalion from the first days of April until the middle of June when it moved to *Micmac Camp* which, if not adjacent to, was close enough to *Camp 'A'* so that work on the same projects was being continued.

From June 2 to 14, 1916, was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of the village of *Hooge*, of *Sanctuary Wood*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had 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, they never exploited.



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

(continued)

(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*)



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. However, their line still held.

After days of fighting, the detonation of further mines, and horrific gun-fire, the end came on June 13 when the Canadians attacked after having unleashed a ten-hour barrage. Thus they regained the positions which had been lost on the first day of the battle, June 2. And so, as the engagement closed, both sides – apart from a small loss to the Germans in the *Hooge Sector* – ended up where they had begun: status quo.



And the cemeteries were a little bit fuller.

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

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

It had been the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division which had borne the brunt of the German onslaught. And although a number of other units had been called forward to serve *in extremis*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion had not been one of them. It had remained busy constructing defences, drainage ditches, and at least one dressing station in the area of nearby Voormezele during that period and, in fact, continued to do so – and to remain in *Micmac Camp* – until the last week of August.



On the 26<sup>th</sup> of that month the unit marched to a training area in the vicinity of the northern French commune of Serques, itself some eight kilometres to the north of the larger centre of St-Omer. The training continued until September 4 when, in two separate detachments, the Battalion boarded trains which carried both parties southwards towards the French *Département de la Somme*.

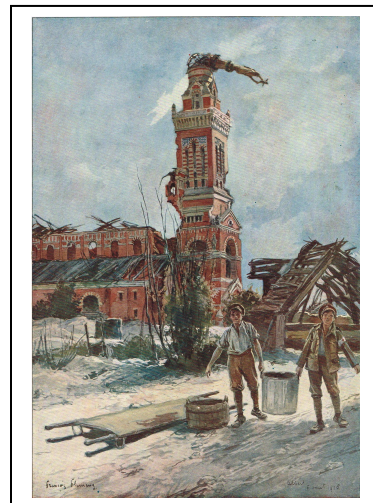
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On the following day, September 5, the two detachments, from their respective detraining stations, arrived on foot at Ribeaucourt where... *The inhabitants...did not like the soldiers being with them. They had probably not been well treated by previous bodies of troops.* (2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion War Diary)

The Battalion marched out of Ribeaucourt on the morrow at seven o'clock in the morning. Four of the following five days were to be spent on foot, moving toward the large military *Brickfields Camp (la Briqueterie)*, in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert. From there it was but a short distance to the forward area and to the front lines themselves.

By 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 which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in a span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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

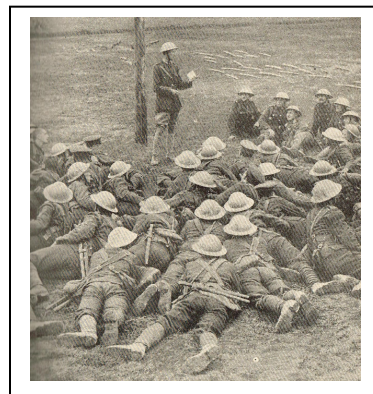


One entry from a Canadian Battalion War Diary – not that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion – makes mention of first impressions of the town of Albert that the Canadians came to know well: *The town was deserted, as regards its civil population, with the exception of a few who had ventured back to cater to the troops who chanced to be billeted there. The Church, a pleasing structure of pressed red brick and fine building stone, very badly battered by the enemy heavy guns. Surmounting the lofty spire is the figure of the Virgin with the Child in Her arms. This at some time, had received a direct hit at its Base and is now leaning over at an angle of 120 degrees, as if to take a headlong dive to earth.*

On that first day of the battle, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel 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 collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



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(Right: After the fighting of Courcelette (see below), lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from *Le Miroir*)



(Right below: Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)



September 15 was the day on which the Canadians attacked in the area of the ruined villages of Flers and of Courcelette, the first major confrontation for the Canadians during 1<sup>st</sup> Somme. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion was to be in the forward assembly points before zero hour and was to advance with the fighting troops to repair routes, build new strong-points, lay cables, dig new access trenches, lay trench tram-lines, erect marking-posts and, at times, act as stretcher-bearers.

Some of this work, leading up to the starting-points of September 15, had already been under way by that time. Subsequently, Private Fowlow's Battalion then found itself continually employed during the days of the offensive itself and then for the weeks afterwards – all the time attracting the attention of the enemy guns. It was not to be until October 3 that the War Diarist was able to record... *Battalion commenced rest period.*

There was, it goes without saying, still work to be done in the rest area – one of the least gratifying days surely being October 7 spent in constructing latrines – but at least the unit was no longer being shot at – or, if so, only from long range. And on October 8, it began a retirement from the area. Moving at first in a westerly direction, the Battalion then turned northwards to pass behind the city of Arras and some twenty-five kilometres beyond, to arrive in the commune of Ruitz on October 13 of that 1916.



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

For the remainder of the year of 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion was employed in the area of Fosse 10\* in the outskirts of the mining centre and city of Lens. The War Diarist found little to write about during these weeks, repeating on multiple occasions... *Work carried on as usual.*

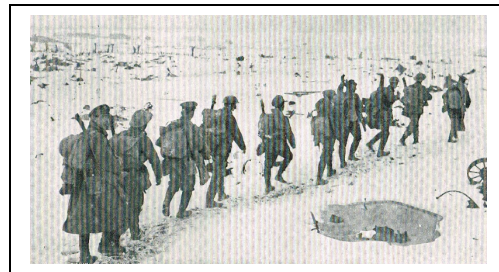
*\*Fosse, while often meaning a ditch, is also the French word for a mine-shaft or pit.*

In mid-January the unit was ordered to retire to the *training area*. There were obviously several such places, but the one to which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion eventually reported at the end of the month was in the area of the community of Lozinghem, also the temporary home of a number of military medical facilities.



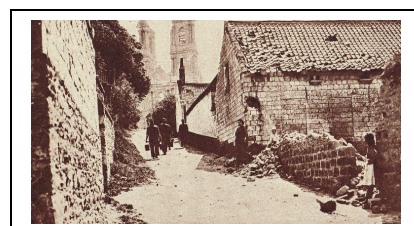
**(Right below: A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)**

Two weeks later the Battalion was on the move once more, on this occasion southward to Écoivres and Mont St-Éloy, still behind the lines but yet close enough for the German artillery's proximity to be noted in the Battalion War Diary. It was also close enough for work parties to be sent out each and every day of the month of March - and for the casualty list to increase.



**(Right and right below: The village of St-Éloi at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016)**

The work at the time included not only repairs and improvements to the trench system, but such things as construction of a light railway, the erection of huts, consolidation of new artillery positions, the establishment of a dressing station and the excavation of underground facilities.



Whether the Battalion War Diarist was completely unaware of the purpose of all the ongoing preparations or whether he was ordered not to speculate upon it is of course not known. Whatever the case, it was not until April 8 that he made the following entry: *Instructions having been received that the Canadian Corps would attack at 5:30 a.m. with the object of capturing VIMY RIDGE...*



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Division was to be designated four tasks: “A” Company was allotted the task of extending the Mow Cop Spur of the Tram line towards Les Tilleuls. “B” Company was allotted the task of opening up and repairing the Neuville St-Vaast - Thelus Road. “C” Company was allotted the task of burying the Northern Cable. “D” Company was allotted the task of burying the Southern Cable\*.

*\*These latter were, of course, communication cables which would have to advance just behind the attacking troops across No-Man’s-Land and into the positions expected to be won from the Germans.*

On that April 9 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 few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



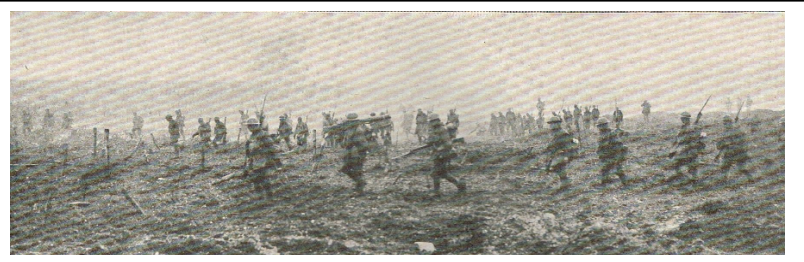
While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Preceding page: *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.

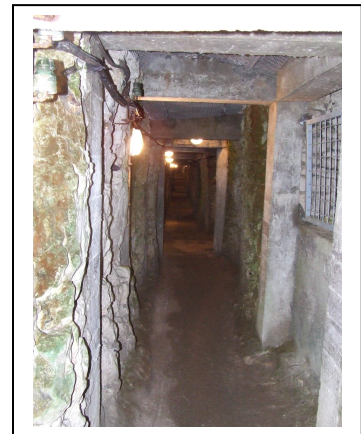
*\*There was also a British brigade placed under Canadian command.*

(Right: *Canadian troops of either the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, and equipped 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: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

By the evening of April 10, Vimy Ridge had been cleared of the enemy. Unfortunately, however, the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days. Fearful of German counter-attacks, the High Command did not – and up to a point, in all fairness, could not – exploit the momentary disarray in the German ranks. Orders had been given to hold the positions taken and to consolidate. By the end of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.



(Right below: *A light railway-line in the throes of construction at Vimy Ridge – while the battle is still being fought – and at the same time being used for the evacuation of some of the wounded – from Illustration*)

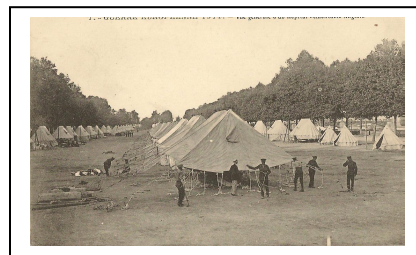
Meanwhile, in the days leading up to – and then during and after – the attack on Vimy Ridge, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, had been based well behind the front and working on the tasks that had been allotted to them. In the course of this period the unit had incurred a number of casualties, as ever, due mainly to enemy artillery...but, unfortunately, there appears to be no information a propos the wounding of Pioneer Fowlow.



(continued)

(Right below: 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)

The son of George Charles Fowlow, fisherman, and of Mary Ann Fowlow (née *Evelly*) of East Trinity, Trinity Bay - then by the time of enlistment of 113, Long's Hill, in St. John's; and later again of 6, Gilbert Street, also in the City - he was also brother to Ralph, to Frank, Naomi-Maud, Violet-May and to Maggie-Martha.



Pioneer Fowler was reported as having *died of wounds* at seven o'clock in the morning of April 10, 1917\*, at the 10<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station, at the time established at the Remy Siding to the south of Poperinghe, Belgium.

*\*In view of the reported date, April 10, and the distance to Poperinghe, he almost certainly incurred his wounds either on April 9 or even before.*

Norman Stewart Fowlow had enlisted at the *apparent age* of eighteen years: *declared date* of birth in East Trinity, Newfoundland, January 13, 1897. However, the copied parish records cite the date as a year later, January 13, 1898.

Pioneer Norman Stewart Fowlow 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 26, 2023.



