



Sapper Frederick Gabriel (Number 715693) of the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers, is buried in Étapes Military Cemetery, Grave reference XXX.O.6.

(Right: The image of a Canadian Engineers cap badge is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, Fred Gabriel may have made the crossing from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on at least two occasions*. However, the Census of 1911 documents that he was still residing with his parents in Stephenville, on the west coast of the country.

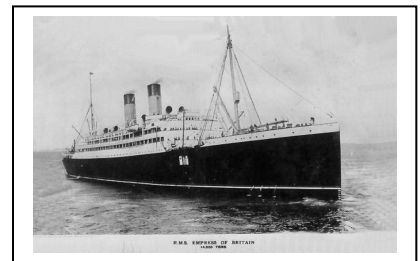
**Both documents, from Ancestry.ca, require confirming evidence.*

It was likely in the Cape Breton mining town of Glace Bay where he was working the coal face that Fred Gabriel enlisted on January 17 of 1916. Thirty-nine days later he had by then travelled to the town of Truro where, on February 25, he underwent a medical examination and also his attestation.

While his first pay records confirm this as also the date of Fred Gabriel's enlistment, they also document that this was the day on which he was *taken on strength* by the 106th Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. However it was not to be until March 7, likely still in Truro, that the commanding officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Innes, brought to a conclusion the enlistment formalities when he declared – on paper – that *...Frederick Gabriel...having finally been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*. When it was that Private Gabriel was attached to "D" Company appears not to be recorded.

The 106th Battalion was based in Truro and it was there that both 'A' Company (comprised mostly of local men) and 'D' Company (many of them from Cape Breton) underwent their preliminary training) – 'B' and 'C' Companies went elsewhere. One of the local recruits from Truro itself, in his papers, recalled that there were... *no barracks, parade ground or firing range, the men were living in hotels, the YMCA, or at home... training consisted mainly of shovelling snow and marching*.

It was on July 15 of 1916 that Private Gabriel embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain* in Halifax for passage to the United Kingdom. On board were also travelling the 8th Draft of 'C' Battery, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery; the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*); the 93rd and 105th Battalions of Canadian Infantry; and the 5th Draft of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, all of which, including the personnel of Private Gabriel's 106th Battalion, surely totalled close to some four-thousand military personnel in all.



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

Empress of Britain sailed on July 15 or 16 - the same source cites both dates - encountering poor weather for most of the voyage. This may account for the relatively slow crossing, as it was not until nine days later, on July 25, that the ship docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool.

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From the ship the 106th Battalion was transported by train to *East Dibgate Camp*, a subsidiary of the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, by then established in the English county of Kent and on the Dover Straits in close proximity to the coastal town and harbour of Folkestone. Private Gabriel was to remain in England – albeit not only at *Shorncliffe* – for the following six months.

(Right below: *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 first of three transfers occurred on October 5 when he was *taken on strength* by the 40th Canadian Battalion at nearby *Cæsar’s Camp** - where legend would have the Roman setting up shop with his troops on the first day of his invasion of Britain. Private Gabriel’s second move came to pass a mere twenty-five days later, on October 30, when he was sent elsewhere, to the Canadian Engineer Training Depot at *Crowboro’ (Crowborough)*, in the county of Sussex and some forty miles inland from the coast.



**The main body and the 2nd Draft of the 40th Battalion were not to arrive in England until the 24th and 25th of that October, but the 1st Draft had been there since that June. Private Gabriel’s role at Cæsar’s Camp was likely to help prepare facilities for the newcomers from Canada.*

On the 19th day of January of the New Year, 1917, Private - now to be addressed and referred to as *Sapper* - Gabriel was transferred to the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company – undoubtedly because of his experience as a miner – and was transported to France. He likely passed through the English south-coast port of Southampton on his way to Le Havre, on the estuary of the River Seine.



It was near to Le Havre, at Rouelles, that was to be found the Canadian General Base Depot through which all troops arriving from England by now were processed before being despatched to the *Western Front*.

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

He was one of only eighty-eight men to report to the Depot from the United Kingdom on the following day, January 20; but then he was one of the draft of eight-hundred fifty-eight which was to depart from there on the next day again. Not all of these re-enforcements, of course, were despatched from Le Havre to the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company, and the Company War Diarist has not recorded the eventual number of arrivals *to duty* with the parent company on the 22nd, two days later.

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The 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company had been formed in Canada, mobilized in Pembroke, Ontario, during the latter part of 1915 and had been almost immediately ordered to *overseas service*. It, in fact, had embarked *in* - and had sailed *from* – Saint John, New Brunswick, on January 1, New Years' Day of 1916, on board the SS *Metagama*. The ship had then docked in an unspecified English port, but likely Liverpool, on January 10.

The first page of the 1st Tunnelling Company War Diary then records its three-hundred twelve *all ranks* as having disembarked in the French port-city of Le Havre on February 16, 1916, only some three weeks afterwards.

The need for specialized formations of tunnellers had become evident during the late winter and early spring of 1915 when the Germans were to show that they had already prepared for a subterranean campaign and had stolen a march on the British who were now struggling to catch up. Thus the first British tunnellers – many of them miners by trade – were to be engaged in establishing measures such as counter-mines and listening-posts to neutralize the German threat.

The British had then encouraged the Dominions of the Empire to form and train tunnelling units to bolster their own, British, numbers; thus the Canadian Expeditionary Force was eventually to organize three such companies*.

**It was in fact the 3rd Canadian Tunnelling Company to be first to serve on the Continent (see * below) as it had been organized there from personnel already on hand in the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions.*

The 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company, after having arrived in France at Le Havre and having spent a week at the nearby Canadian Base Depot, then had straightway made its way northwards to serve in the area of Armentières*, immediately to the south of the Franco-Belgian frontier. There it had been associated with British tunnelling companies until the month of May of that year when it had moved some kilometres further north into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.



(Right above: *The Cité Bonjean Military Cemetery in the outskirts of Armentières wherein lie may dead of the early period of the Great War – photograph*)

While some sources have the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company travelling to the Ypres Salient '*for instruction*' immediately after its arrival in France, this is apparently incorrect. The unit's War Diary records it as having gone to Ste-Marie Cappel in northern France.

It was there that for the first week in March its sections had been attached for that instruction to companies – the 171st and 250th - of the Royal Engineers and to the 3rd Canadian Tunnelling Company which itself had only just been formed at Ste-Marie Cappel in January, a bare two months earlier.

On March 8 the Company War Diary records... '*Armentières...Started to take over front from 182 Coy R.E....*'. Two days later the 182nd Company had moved away, leaving three officers attached to the Canadian unit.

Even though the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company was a unit of the Canadian Corps, it would appear, according to the Company War Diary, that it was very much still to continue to work in conjunction with Royal Engineer and other British troops. Thus, although by the end of March of 1916, the unit now well versed in the tunnelling business, it had still been operating at the time at Armentières to the south and appears not to have been involved in the combined British and Canadian *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*.

That confrontation was to begin 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 was not, however, to go 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 which had then become filled with water from the prolific rain.



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

Thus the Canadian contribution to this combined effort did not go as anticipated with the Canadians taking over from the presumed British success by consolidating and further developing the newly-won positions. Instead, on or about April 4-5, they were to pick up the attack where it had been left off by the exhausted British and only to find themselves up to the knees – and at times the waist – in water, disputing shattered trench-systems and those flooded craters.

Some two weeks later the confrontation officially was to come to a close with the Germans holding their lines and the Canadians having incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

Of course, in the course of this subterranean war-fare, the Germans were also busy, at times in the same areas as the British, and there were at times to be underground fighting when one side had broken into – at times on purpose, at other times inadvertently – the other side’s tunnels and galleries.

(Right: *The remains of a construction built at Messines in 1916 by the Germans to counter-act the British tunnellers: they sank twenty-nine wells – one seen here – from which horizontal galleries were excavated to intercept the British tunnels being dug under the German lines. – photograph from 2014*)



The underground war was in a class all of its own and it must be near-impossible to imagine the feelings and emotions of even the most seasoned miners as they toiled in those primitive conditions, metres under the surface. The Company War Diary entry for April 24 - the Company serving in and under the forward area in the vicinity of Armentières at the time - reads partially as follows: *Heavy strafing along the whole Front. Lieut. Flett and nine sappers entombed in mine at Trench 88...*

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Being buried alive was probably the eventuality that most tunnellers dreaded. On this occasion the... *entombed party liberated after 18 hours – none the worse for their experience.* The story did not always enjoy such a happy ending.



(Right: *Railway Wood and, just perceptible in its fringe, the white Memorial to the twelve Royal Engineers who were buried alive while working in tunnels beneath this place: Their remains are there to this day. – photograph from 2015*)

In May of that 1916, the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company was to transferred to the north-east, to the area of Zillebeke in the *Ypres Salient*, to an artificial rise known as *the Bluff** which was at that time in British hands but being continually contested, not least of all below the surface, by the tunnellers of both sides. Not long afterwards, it would seem to have been during the month of August, work was also to be started by the unit in the sector of St-Éloi which had already seen such excavations (see above) some months prior.

**It was a narrow ridge which had been created by the spoil from an attempted, but failed, construction of a canal; however it provided its occupiers with a good strategic vantage-point in an otherwise flat landscape.*

In the late summer and autumn the four Canadian Divisions, at that time all stationed in Belgium, was ordered to be withdrawn to serve in the ongoing British offensive at *the Somme*. They were not to return north for another year, not until October of 1917.

The 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company, however, continued its dangerous work at *the Bluff* and at St-Éloi during this period, honeycombing both areas with tunnels. At times the enemy was heard doing likewise and small amounts of explosives were often detonated to collapse the German workings – and of course, the Germans reciprocated. Asphyxiation from gas or from a lack of oxygen was a further common danger, and on the surface enemy snipers and artillery both took their toll as did further mishaps associated with the handling of explosives.

It was also about this time that the entire underground of that area was being transformed into living-quarters for large numbers of troops: not only dug-outs and shelters but dormitories, work-shops, kitchens, medical facilities and communication tunnels – such as those soon to be used at *Vimy Ridge* - were now being excavated.



This was the world into which Sapper Gabriel reported – likely at La Clytte to the south-west of Ypres - on January 22, 1917.

(Right above: *One of the subterranean displays – this one of a medical facility - in the museum at Zonnebeke, Belgium – photograph from 2014(?)*)

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The winter of 1916-1917 was quiet along the entirety of the Western Front – as were to be *all* the winters of the *Great War* – although of course there were always incidents to remind one that it was war-time.

There was still a daily count of casualties, as ever caused mostly by the enemy’s artillery-fire and by his snipers, but it was sickness, of all kinds, that kept the medical services busy: tonsillitis, influenza, bronchitis and pneumonia – and at times tuberculosis - conjunctivitis, scabies, trench-foot and frost-bite, venereal disease, debility, the list goes on...as well as the standard cuts and bumps, strains and bruises - and a perhaps surprising amount of dental work.

During this quiet time, all of the Canadian units were withdrawn in rotation to rest – but also to train – in the rear areas: parades; presentation of decorations; inspections; bayonet fighting; route marches; musketry; drill; instruction; physical training; familiarization with weapons both *ours* and *theirs*; visits from politicians, brass and per-times royalty; and on the lighter side, sports and the occasional concert – even a bath from time to time.



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

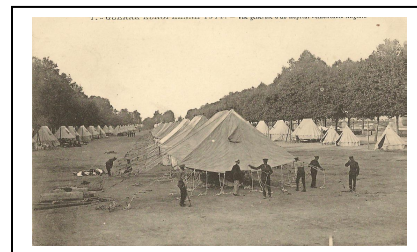
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Not long after reporting to his new unit, Sapper Gabriel was one of those in need of medical attention, in his case on two occasions: The first was on February 14, 1917, when, having suffered contusions to the muscles of an elbow, he was admitted into the 41st Divisional Rest Station for six days before being discharged *to duty* on February 20; the second problem was a case of scabies for which he was sent on March 19 to the 139th Field Ambulance before being moved on to the 41st Divisional Rest Station on that same day.



(Right above: A *British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some* – from a vintage post-card)

The medical staff at the 41st DRS was evidently not happy with Sapper Gabriel’s condition and he was forwarded on the next day to the Northumbrian Casualty Clearing Station - possibly the 19th CCS which at the time was at Agnez-les-Duisans – where he remained until being released on March 28.



(Right above: 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)

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When the Canadian Corps stormed *Vimy Ridge* and its surrounds on Easter Monday of April 9, 1917, the first day of the *First Battle of Arras*, the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company was one of the few units of Canadian troops not to participate. It was still digging in Belgium for an offensive to begin two months later, on June 7.

(Right: *The Canadian National Memorial* which since 1936 has stood on *Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)



That tunnelling being undertaken by Sapper Gabriel and his fellow miners ceased towards the end of May when the completed galleries began to be filled with high explosive. It appears that the final tamping-down of the charges was completed during the last week in May, as the only similar excavation work mentioned in the War Diary of June 1 to 6 was... *Work continued of Battle Headquarters for Brigades & Battalions* (June 1)... then... *Dugouts nearing completion* (June 4)... and finally... *Dugouts completed* (June 6).



(Right above: *The Messines (today Mesen) Ridge* almost a century after the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company dug in the earth underneath it - photograph from 2014)

The 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company War Diarist takes up the story of the attack at Messines Ridge of June 7, 1916: *...all infantry evacuated from Dugout system by 2.00 am and Gallery & stairways strutted. Final check on time by Captain Thorne, who, at zero hour gave the word (go). Very heavy shock, followed by an immense...flame 150 to 200 feet high, was the result. Underground effects not as heavy as expected. Forty minutes later a patrol of four Officers & one Sergeant inspected new Crater. Crater about 300 feet in diameter & 40 to 50 ft deep. A wounded German dug out from debris about 30 ft from lip of Crater, informed us, that all dugouts on his left were full of men, and that they were "all dead". No trace of these dugouts could be found...*

(Right: *Lone Tree Crater*, the result of one of the nineteen mines to be detonated on June 7, 1917. Today it is a place for reflection and a symbol of peace. – photograph from 2014)



The taking of the *Messines Ridge* had been necessary for the next phase of the offensive to proceed. However, the mine explosions had been so devastating that it was to take eight weeks before roads could be built across the stricken landscape in order that the required equipment and supplies for the attack might be moved to the forward areas.

This second stage in this two-part offensive was officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, but the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that - ostensibly - was one of the British Army's objectives.

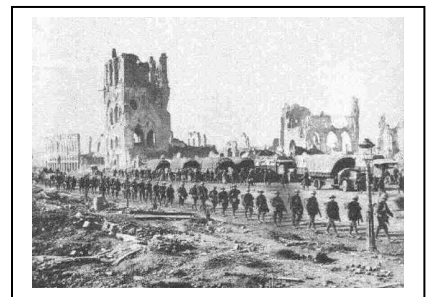
(Right: A detachment of Canadian sappers constructing a road somewhere on the Continent – from Illustration)



On June 8, Sapper Gabriel and the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company began to construct these necessary thoroughfares. Only days later this work was handed over to another unit and for the next number of weeks the Diarist reported much construction and re-construction of dugouts.

Even on the day when the advance re-commenced, July 31, the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company... went 'over the top' with the first wave of the attack for the purpose of locating, examining and repairing enemy dugouts for occupation by Coy. and other H.Q. as the attack progressed. (War Diary)

Apparently the Company also performed infantry duties as well until, some five hours after zero hour, it was ordered to begin to repair yet another road.



The offensive continued during the month of August despite the difficulties imposed by the unusually foul weather. Then, at the beginning of September, the British High Command called a temporary halt to re-enforce and to re-organize*.

(Right above: Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration)

***The weather gods co-operated in September; in fact it would have been a good time to press on with the campaign. Then, on or about the day that the attack was resumed, September 26, the rains came again – and stayed**

Things were not proceeding as well as had been anticipated and the month-long pause had also been imposed to give other incoming forces – the Anzacs** and the Canadians – time to prepare for the task ahead.



(Right: An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration)

****Australia and New Zealand Army Corps**

In the meantime, however, it had been business as usual for the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company – much of it once again in the area of *the Bluff* – and the War Diary was often employing the term... *routine work*.

In October the unit was... *attached to the 5th British Division, 10th Corps, and working in front of the 1st Anzacs Corps. Sections No. 1 and No. 3 employed on roads... Sections No 2 and No. 4 employed on Light Railways...* (War Diary)

(Right below: *Canadian sappers, having just laid a narrow-gauge railway line across the battle-field, use it immediately to evacuate the wounded of both sides. This photograph was taken on the field at or in the vicinity of Vimy Ridge during the days of the attack of April 9-10, 1917. – from Illustration*)

This work apparently was to continue until the end of that month when the Company was equipped with a new boring machine and it began to construct new and deeper positions and dugouts in the area of *Railway Wood* and the Ypres-Menin Road, work which was made no easier by the continuous rain and by the sandy soil.

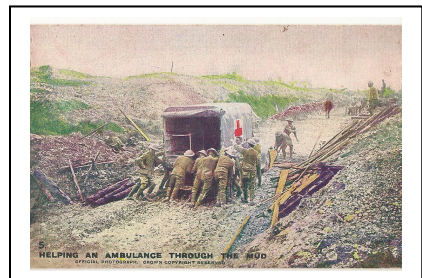


(Excerpt from the 1st Canadian Tunnelling Company War Diary) 9/11/17 ...*Trouble with No 3 Shaft, running ground, sinking discontinued while braces were put in. Bottom set removed and sand bags put in behind. Showery weather. Sect. 2 having trouble with shaft which collects water rapidly. Four sets jacked down... Late delivery of material to job (caused by enemy shelling) delayed the work of Sect. 4. One casualty 715693 Spr Gabriel F wounded.*

Sapper Gabriel had incurred shrapnel wounds to both thighs. He was evacuated on the night of the 9-10 November to the 17th Casualty Clearing Station at the *Rémy Siding*, to the south of Poperinghe, where he was deemed to be *dangerously ill*.

On November 12 his condition was reported to have *improved* and he was thereupon transported to and admitted into the 1st Canadian Stationary Hospital in the French coastal town of Étapes.

(Right: *Transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)



There his condition declined once more to the status of *seriously ill* and the decision was taken to amputate: On November 19 Sapper Gabriel lost his right leg.

The son of Alphonse Gabriel – to whom, from August of 1916 up until and including June of 1917, he had allotted a monthly ten dollars from his pay* - and of Julia Gabriel of Stephenville, Newfoundland, he was also older brother to at least Catherine, to Eunice, Vincent, to Nora, Mamie, Monica and to Norman (from 1911 Census).

Sapper Gabriel was reported as having *died of wounds* on December 4, 1917, in the 1st Canadian Stationary Hospital at Étapes at thirty minutes past midnight.



(Right above: *The photograph of Sapper Fred Gabriel is from the Ancestry.ca web-site.*)

**As of July 1, 1917, he had then begun to allocate a monthly twenty dollars to a Miss Annie Stonier of 36, Steely Lane, Chorley, Lancashire (later of 19A, Hollinshead Street, Chorley)... 'mother & guardian of illeg. child'...*

Frederick Gabriel had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-five years: date of birth in Stephenville, Newfoundland, December 29, 1891.

Sapper Frederick Gabriel 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 25, 2023.

