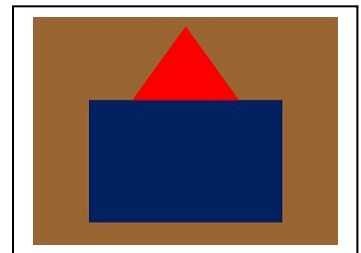




Private Ernest Harris (Number 68038) of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Regina Trench Cemetery: Grave reference I.D.3.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder flash of the 25th Battalion is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

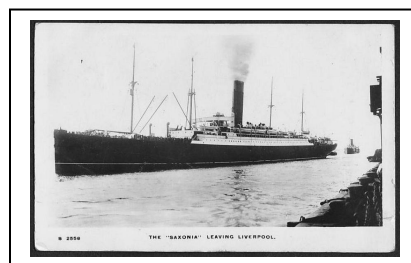


His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a seaman – and he apparently had multiple tattoos to prove it – Ernest Harris seems to have left little, if any, trace of his travels from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, except the proof that he was there, in the capital city, Halifax, on the third day of the month of December, 1914.

His pay records show that December 3 was the date on which the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services, thus logically making that the day of his enlistment. They also show him as having been *taken on strength* by the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) as well as having been attested on the same December 3.

On the following day, Private Harris underwent a medical examination before, four days later again, on December 8, his enlistment was brought to an official conclusion by the declaration – on paper – of Lieutenant Colonel Le Cain, the Commanding Officer of the 25th Battalion, that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

After some six months of training, almost certainly at the Regimental Headquarters in the Halifax Armouries, Private Harris and his fellow recruits were ordered to proceed overseas. Having marched through Halifax, there to be cheered by thousands of the city's exuberant citizens, the unit embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia* in Halifax Harbour on May 20, 1915.



(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.*)

Private Harris and his 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) were not alone to take passage for the United Kingdom; also travelling on *Saxonia* were the 22nd Battalion of Canadian Infantry and the 2nd Divisional Ammunition Park. The 25th Battalion War Diary entry of the day records a total of two-thousand two-hundred seventy-four military personnel boarding the vessel for the voyage.

Saxonia sailed later on that same May 20, before, having traversed the Atlantic in nine days, arriving in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport at ten minutes past four in the morning of May 29. The ship docked some four hours later whereupon the troops disembarked to board trains.



(Right: *Plymouth Harbour and some of the impressive administrative buildings – today abandoned by the Royal Navy – a century after the Great War – photograph from 2011*)

(continued)

The trains transported the new arrivals eastwards to the English county of Kent. The Canadians at the time were establishing a large military complex comprising several camps, the ensemble to be known as *Shorncliffe*, just south down the Dover Straits from the town and harbour of Folkestone.

(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 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. The Canadian (1st) Division* had been serving on the Continent since February of 1915, mostly having been deployed in 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.*

***Apart from its first month on the Continent in the Fleurbaix Sector and then six weeks in May and June of 1915 when it had fought in northern France at Festubert and Givenchy.*



On September 15, the 25th Battalion left Shorncliffe Camp in the late afternoon en route on foot for 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.*

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

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.



(Preceding page: 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 the enemy’s artillery fire and to his snipers, but until the spring of 1916, for the personnel of the Canadian 2nd Division, there was to be only the daily grind of the infantryman’s life in – and out of – the trenches*.

(Right below: 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: 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, routines and perils 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, in its first major confrontation.



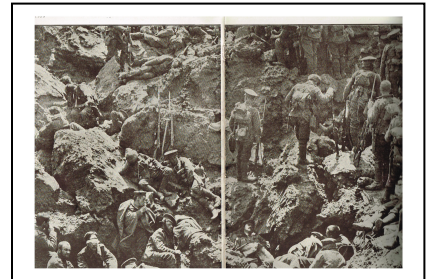
The incident became known as the Action – or Battle - of the St-Éloi Craters.

(continued)

It had begun on March 27 when the British detonated a series of mines in galleries tunnelled under the German lines and had followed this 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 abundant rain. The troops often fought immersed up to their knees – and at times their waists.

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

On and about April 3 it was the turn of the troops 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, like 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 – although the official end to the affair is recorded as April 17 - 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.

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



(Right above: *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*)

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.

(continued)

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

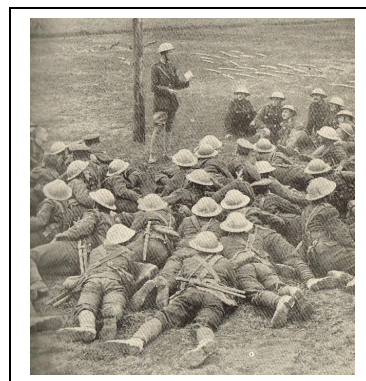
By the beginning of September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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



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.

(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 (see below), September 1916. – from *The War Illustrated**)

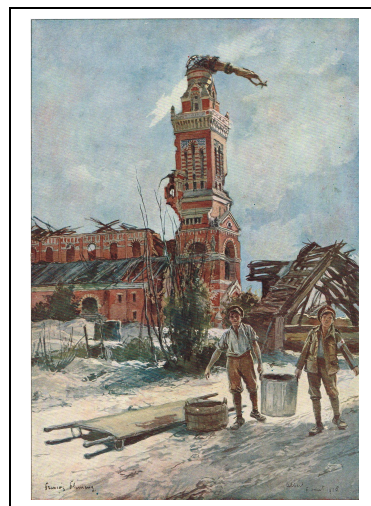


As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the *25th Battalion* had arrived at the large military camp which had been established as *Brickfields Camp (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert. On the *11th, 12th and 13th* the unit had trained – at times in co-operation with aircraft – and provided working-parties.

On September 14 the Private Harris' unit 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 Diarist has recorded thirty-six killed in action, 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 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...*

Private Harris’ “A” Company formed the second wave to go into the attack, and followed fifty yards behind “B” and “C” Companies.

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during this 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 below: *Wounded at the Somme being 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 six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay - Angres and Bruay.

(continued)



Private Harris, however, was not to make that march: he had fallen during the attack of October 1.

The son of James Harris, fisherman (likely deceased February 2 of 1892) and Susannah Harris (née Steads)* – to whom as of June 1 of 1915 he had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - of Bonavista, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Ronald, to Euphemia and to Jessie.

**She later remarried, in 1900, to Thomas Rolls.*

(Right: *The sacrifice of Private Harris is honoured on the War Memorial in the community of Bonavista. – photograph from 2010*)



Ernest Harris had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-one years: date of birth at Bonavista, Newfoundland, September 5, 1883.

Private Ernest Harris 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.