



Private Charles Robert Hatcher (Number 489238) of the 18th Battalion (*Western Ontario*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bedford House Cemetery: Grave reference, 4.I.L.4.

(Right: *The image of the 18th Battalion (Western Ontario) cap badge is from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site.*)

(continued)

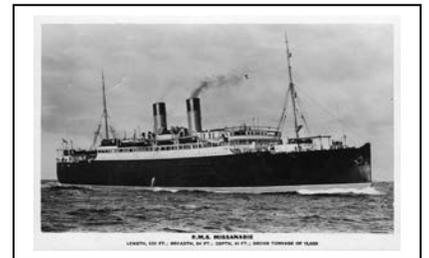


His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a sailor, Charles Robert Hatcher appears to have left behind him little, if any, information a propos his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, except that he is documented as having been in the capital city, Halifax – residing at 40, Cornwallis Street - in November of the year 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

According to his first pay records, it was on the 23rd day of that month that he began to be remunerated for his services to the Canadian Army and was also *taken on strength* by the 66th Regiment (*Princess Louise Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Militia*. He as well underwent a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force...* - and attestation on the same day. Four days later, on November 27, his enlistment was brought to an official conclusion by the Commanding Officer of the 66th Regiment declaring – on paper - that...*Charles Robert Hatcher...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**As a unit of the Canadian Militia, the 66th Regiment (Princess Louise Fusiliers) was interdicted by law to operate outside the borders of the nation. However, there was nothing to preclude it from recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force – in fact the earliest such Battalions were for the most part volunteers recruited from the Militia regiments.*

It was not long before Private Hatcher – a soldier of the 2nd Reinforcement Draft of the 66th Regiment - was taking ship in the harbour at Halifax for the trans-Atlantic crossing to the United Kingdom. The ship was the SS *Missanabie* on board of which were also several other military units: the 3rd Divisional Cavalry Squadron; the 3rd Divisional Cyclists Company; the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*), Canadian Infantry, and the newly-formed 2nd (Canadian) Tunnelling Company.



(Right above: *The photograph of His Majesty's Transport Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Missanabie sailed on the day on which Private Hatcher embarked, January 22, 1916. She crossed the Atlantic in eight days, arriving in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport on the penultimate day of that January. There Private Hatcher's Draft boarded a train which 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.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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 *Shorncliffe* subsidiary camp to which the 66th Regiment was attached was at East Sandling. At some time between that date and April 1 of the same year, 1916, Private Hatcher was transferred, possibly for only a matter of days – and perhaps only on paper – to the 17th Canadian Reserve Battalion. Such a transfer was usually the augury that a move to *active service* on the Continent was imminent; and so it proved to be in Private Hatcher’s case.

Given the proximity of *Shorncliffe* to Folkestone, it was likely through there that Private Hatcher passed on that April 1 – and thus also likely through the harbour of Boulogne on the French coast almost opposite. Having landed in France he was transported to the Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine, once there to be again transferred, on this occasion to the 18th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Western Ontario*).



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



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

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



Sixteen days afterwards, on April 18, Private Hatcher was despatched from the Base Depot to join his unit *in the field*. Two days later again he did so, one of a re-enforcement draft to report *to duty* on that April 20 at Dickebusch, to the south-west of Ypres, and to where the parent unit, the 18th Battalion, had retired on only the previous day.

* * * * *

The 18th Battalion (*Western Ontario*) was an element of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2nd Canadian Division, newly-formed by September of 1915. It had been in the middle of that same month that the formation had embarked from England and landed in France, the majority of the units having passed through Folkestone and Boulogne on the way to their first posting, in the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

The sector to which the 2nd Canadian Division had been designated was to the south of the remnants of the shattered city of Ypres. It was there that the new-comers were to become accustomed to the rigours and routines 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 the forward area, the latter 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)



One of the communities of the area of the 2nd Canadian Division's operations – a village having been mostly abandoned by the civilian population by then – was that of St-Éloi, where the 18th Battalion, some seven months after having arrived on the Continent was to fight its first major engagement.

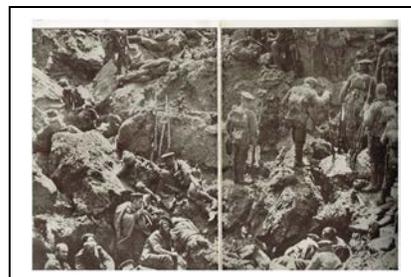
(Right below: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was to be little left standing. – from Illustration)

It had begun on March 27 of 1916 when the British had detonated a series of mines in galleries tunnelled under the German lines and had followed up with an infantry assault. All had not, however, gone as planned: the British attack had become bogged down, not least of all because of the problem of crossing the craters caused by its own mines which had by then become filled with water due to the abundant rain. The troops had often fought immersed up to their knees – and at times to the waist.



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

On April 3 it had been the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to enter the fray, to relieve the by-then exhausted British troops. Fighting under the same abominable conditions, they, like the British, had found that the shattered landscape little resembled what they had been told to expect. And they, like their British comrades-in-arms, had floundered and has lost their way as the German defences were to daily grow ever more resolute and their incessant artillery fire was to increase ever more in strength.



The fighting was to linger on into the fourth week of April – although the official end to the engagement 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.

The 18th Battalion had become directly involved when on April 8 it had been ordered to attack Craters 2 and 3; this was followed by several days where the unit had supplied working-parties and carrying-parties before it was to retire on the 11th after a final bombing raid on the night of the 10th-11th.

The exact number of casualties that had been incurred during that operation is hard to ascertain but had been approximately twenty *killed in action* or *died of wounds* and perhaps some seventy *wounded* and *missing*.

It had then been only days following this incident that Private Hatcher was to report *to duty* with the 18th Battalion.

* * * * *

Private Hatcher had been with the 18th Battalion for some six weeks before the next infantry action involving the Canadian forces came to pass. It was, however, a confrontation which primarily involved the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division, although other units were to be deployed as the situation became critical – but the 18th Battalion was not to be one of them.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of the village of *Hooge, 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 their 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*)

(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 were never delivered – 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.

Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported by a competent artillery program. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back whence they had started on June 2 – and the surrounding cemeteries were a little fuller.

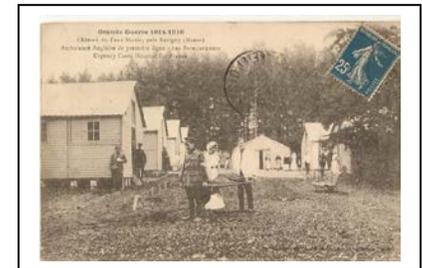


(Right: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery within the bounds of which lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)

During this period, while the 18th Battalion was serving in a forward area until June 12, it was not in a sector which was threatened by the German offensive. Then, from that 12th day of the month until the 17th, the unit had been withdrawn into the area of Dickebusch.

On that latter date Private Hatcher and the 18th Battalion returned to the front line where the War Diary entries reported the... *Position fairly quiet*. The report of June 19 reads as follows: *Position as yesterday. Capt TC LAMB (Paymaster) who has been acting Adjutant proceeded on leave. Lieut WJ BAXTER adjutant returned from leave. 1 OR Died of wounds, 1 OR wounded & 1 OR admitted to hospital.*

Private Hatcher was reported as *wounded* at about seven-thirty at...*trenches near the Bluff...* on that morning of June 19 and then as having been transferred to the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance which had been established at Vlamertinghe Mill – not far distant to the west of Ypres.



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

One of thirty-nine *wounded* and nineteen *sick* recorded in the Ambulance War Diary as having been admitted on that June 19, he was at first reported to have *died of wounds* but, on that same day, this was amended to *killed in action*. Thus Private Hatcher may well have died before any medical attention could be applied.

The son of Robert Hatcher, fisherman – to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay - and of Susan (*Susannah*) Hatcher (née *Ingram*) of Hunt's Island in the District of Burgeo, Newfoundland, he was also brother to James, to Henry-Edwin, Alice-Willy, George-William and to Philip.

Charles Robert Hatcher had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years: date of birth on Hunt's Island, Burgeo, Newfoundland, July 11, 1893, according to his attestation papers, but June 21, 1892, according to *Ancestry.ca*.

Private Charles Robert Hatcher was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

