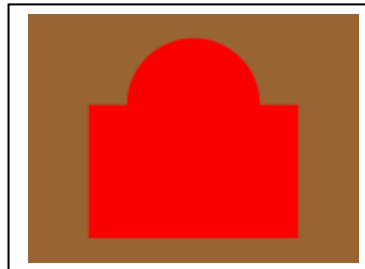




Private Christopher Thomas Hawco (often elsewhere *Hawcoe*) (Number 437217) of the 7th Battalion (1st *British Columbia*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in the Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (*Transport Farm*): Grave reference VI.C.12.

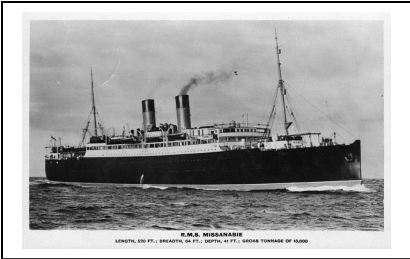
(Right: *The image of the shoulder flash of the 7th Battalion (1st British Columbia) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is from the Wikipedia website.*)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner, Christopher Hawco appears to have left behind him no details of his travels from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Alberta. All that seems to be documented is that he was in the city of Edmonton during the month of May, 1915, for that was where and when he enlisted.

His first pay records show that he offered his services on May 13 of 1915 and that, on the same day, Christopher Hawco was *taken on strength* by the 51st Battalion (*Edmonton*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. May 13 being also the day that he underwent his medical examination and attestation, his application was then immediately confirmed by Lieutenant Colonel Harwood, soon to be the unit's first commanding officer, who declared – on paper - that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Some sources cite April 1 as the date on which the 51st Battalion embarked for *overseas service*. However, the ship on which the unit is recorded as having sailed was the SS *Missanabie* which was to clear the harbour in Halifax on April 18, 1915*.



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

The 51st Battalion was not to sail alone: also taking passage on the vessel for the ten-day trans-Atlantic voyage was the 3rd Divisional Ammunition Sub-Park. Both units were to disembark in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on April 28. From there Private Hawco and his unit were taken south by train, likely to the newly-established Canadian complex in the vicinity of the Hampshire villages of Bramshott and Liphook.



(Right above: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

**It might be possible that April 1 was the date on which Private Hawco's Battalion began its journey across the country from Edmonton to Halifax, but this is only the author's speculation.*

It was then to be only some six weeks before Private Hawco was despatched by the 51st Battalion to the Continent from Camp Bramshott. He is recorded as having sailed on June 8 – likely via the ports of Southampton and Le Havre – and then as having landed in France on the following day.



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

(continued)

He is subsequently documented as having been at the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of Le Havre on June 9* on which day he was transferred and *taken on strength* – at least on paper – by the 7th Battalion (*1st British Columbia*) which was already serving on the *Western Front* at the time.

Private Hawco was apparently *taken on strength* by the 7th Battalion on that same day.

**Private Hawco was one of two-thousand eighty-eight re-enforcements to arrive at the Depot on that date and, on the morrow, he was one of two-thousand thirty-two to be sent to report to duty with their new unit.*

* * * * *

The 7th (*1st British Columbia*) was one of the four battalions comprising the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade which itself was an element of the 1st Canadian Division*. This formation had been on the Continent since the middle of February of 1915 and had served in the Fleurbaix Sector of Northern France before being transferred to the *Ypres Salient* in Belgium in mid-April only two months later.

**The 1st Canadian Division before the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division was designated as simply the Canadian Division.*

The first major confrontation between the 7th Battalion and the German Army was to be the *2nd Battle of Ypres*. The attack came on the evening of April 22 and, while most of the units of the Canadian Division had by then arrived in the *Salient*, it had been only for a matter of days, and some of them were still making their way forward to the front area through the Belgian country-side.

The *colonials* were about to be put to the test: they were not to be found wanting.

The *2nd Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans in the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, with the advent of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, it was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to troops without means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.



(Right above: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



(Right: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

(continued)

The cloud was noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. The 7th Battalion, at the time in reserve in Ypres, had thereupon been ordered forward to Gravenstafel, only to join in the general retreat – and at times chaos – of the following days.

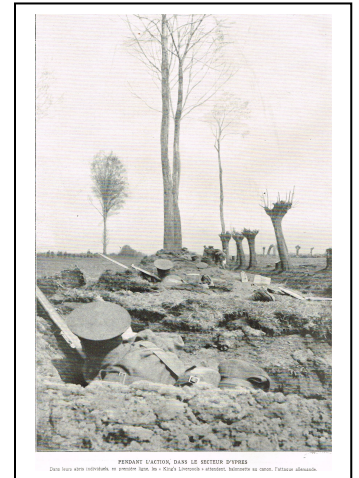
On the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable, the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement had become necessary. At times there had been gaps in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation.



And then the Canadians closed the gaps.

(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time Langemarck) – at the Vancouver Crossroads - where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)

As it was to be with many other units, the 7th Battalion had incurred numerous casualties; in the appendices of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary are to be found the following numbers: *killed in action, seventy-nine; wounded, one-hundred fifty; wounded and missing, twenty-seven; missing in action, three-hundred forty-seven.*



(Right above: *Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which only came into use in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

During the first four days of May the Battalion was... *lying dug in behind hedges in support of FRENCH on YSER CANAL. Heavily shelled...(War Diary)* On May 5 it retired the considerable distance from there to the northern French town of Bailleul where it arrived at three-thirty in the morning.



(Right: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after elements of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn to its western bank – west is to the left – photograph from 2014*)

There followed two weeks of rest – as restful as it ever became during the *Great War* – before the 7th Battalion was ordered south, on or about May 19, across the border into France to fight in actions to be undertaken near places by the names of Festubert and Givenchy.

The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not possessing the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered.

The 7th Battalion had first entered the line, in reserve dugouts, in the area of Festubert on that May 19. The unit was to remain in the sector until June 22 – both Festubert and Givenchy - by that time having participated, it appears from the Battalion War Diary entries, in a single large-scale attack, that of May 24.

The number of casualties for that day were some one-hundred eighty – to add to the fifty due to enemy artillery fire on May 22. Most of the other losses incurred during that entire period were also mostly due to the German guns - as well as his snipers.

(Right: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

**The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

On May 26 the 7th Battalion marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. The reprieve was to last for but five days, until June 1, when the unit was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – its casualties incurred due to repeating many of the same mistakes – on June 22 the 7th Battalion was relieved by troops of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade and it retired from the area.

At about the same time, over a number of days, *all* the other units of the Canadian Division were also to retire.

(continued)

**Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 7th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars. From there it was to move northwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 7th Battalion remained – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north. It was in the vicinity of this last-named community, at Plus Douce Farm, that the unit was now posted.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

At Plus Douce Farm the unit was once more subject to those everyday routines of trench warfare – perhaps by then quite welcome to those who had just served during the confrontations of April at Ypres and of May-June at Festubert and Givenchy.

It was to be another eleven months before the 7th Battalion was involved in any further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – in raids and during patrols - were fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers ensured that constant flow of casualties.

During those eleven months the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions made their appearance – in September and December* respectively - in the Kingdom of Belgium, the 2nd receiving its baptism of fire in the *Action at the St-Éloi Craters*** in April of 1916. Some two months later it was to be the turn of the 3rd Division – at Mount Sorrel, a fierce confrontation into which the other Canadian Divisions were also to be drawn.

**In mid-September on 1915 the Canadian 2nd Division had landed as an entity in France. Most of the units to comprise the Canadian 3rd Division were on the Continent when the formation officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916, but others would not arrive from England for several weeks or even months.*

***Not to be confused with the village of St-Éloi in France just to the north-west of Arras, in a sector with which many Canadian troops were to become very familiar during both 1917 and 1918.*

For the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April were not to be as tranquil as those being experienced during the same period by the personnel of the 7th Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 1st Division.

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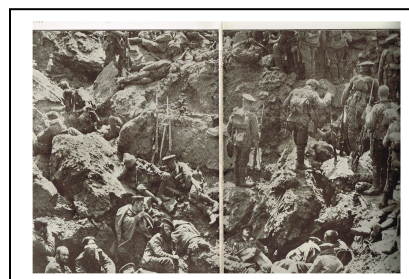
The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St. Eloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27, and followed with an infantry attack.

(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*)



After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

(Right: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from illustration*)



However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2nd Division affair and the personnel of the 7th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery. But their turn was to come: by May 1st the 7th Battalion had been transferred back into the *Ypres Salient*.

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Hooge, Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps* was to be played out. 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.

**While it had been the newly-arrived 3^d Canadian Division which had borne the brunt of the German onslaught, the situation was to become critical enough for other units to be ordered to engage the enemy.*

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



According to the Battalion War Diary, June 3 was first occasion on which 7th Battalion personnel were involved in any infantry action, incurring heavy casualties as did most of those units which were engaged in the Canadian counter-strikes of that day. Then later that evening the Battalion was withdrawn.

It was not until June 10 that the unit was ordered to move forward again to take up its positions for the operation which had been planned for the night of the 12th-13th. During that final Canadian counter-attack of June 13 the War Diarist noted merely the following: *Attack carried out successfully on our immediate left after severe bombardment at dawn. All ground regained. Many prisoners captured.*



(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*)

(Right: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, wherein lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)



While Private Hawco is recorded as having arrived with the 7th Battalion on June 11, it is highly unlikely that he was to be immediately thrown into the cauldron of *Mount Sorrel*. Although this is not confirmed, he likely reported *to duty* on that date behind the lines and was attached to one of the Battalion's companies when the troops at the front were withdrawn on June 14.

* * * * *

The 7th Battalion (1st *British Columbia*) War Diary entry for July 25 reads as follows: *Quiet all day. 10 p.m. Enemy exploded large mine in BLUFF SECTOR. Our machine gun fire & artillery barrage effective in preventing enemy leaving his trenches. No 1 Coy immediately occupy and consolidate crater. 11 p.m. & midnight Bn is relieved by 4th Bn, and move to DOMINION LINES.*

The son of Thomas Hawco (*Hawcoe*), fisherman - deceased 1912 - and of Johanna Hawco (née *Trehey* or *Trahey*) of Chapels Cove in the District of Harbour Main, he was also brother to Anne (later married Ezekiel), to Philip-Joseph, to Margaret-Ellen* (*Maggie*), to Mary-Joseph and to Sarah-J.

**She later married to Hickey, addresses 18 James Street., St. John's, and also 43 New Gower Street on June 6, 1916, the date on which Private Hawco made his will in which he bequeathed his everything to this sister.*

Christopher Thomas Hawco had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and six months: date of birth at Chapels Cove, Newfoundland, December 12, 1892 (from attestation papers). However, Harbour Main Roman Catholic Parish Records cite January 11, 1891 as his date of birth.

(continued)

Private Christopher Thomas Hawco 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 26, 2023.

