

Private David J. Hickey (Number 133110) of the 42nd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today Ieper): Panel reference, 24-26-28-30.

(Right above: The image of the shoulder-flash of the 42nd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a sailor, David Hickey appears to have left behind him no documentation a propos his travels from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Québec - except that he is recorded as being in the city of Montréal during the month of November of 1915, for that is where and when he was to enlist.

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Although the first pay records to be found in his files record him as enlisting on November 4 – and as being *taken on strength* by the 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) on that same day – other documents have him on the preceding day, November 3, attesting, undergoing a medical examination*, and also being *officially* received into the 73rd Battalion by the Commanding Officer of the unit who signed a paper to the effect that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

There appears no explanation for the improbable sequence of some of the above events.

**An examination which found that he was in need of extensive dental work: he was in the dentist's chair on three occasions before that Christmas of 1915, and possibly once while in England during the summer of 1916.*

It was some five months later, on March 31 of 1916, having departed Montreal by train two days earlier, that the thirty-six officers and one thousand thirty-three *other ranks* of the 73rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force took ship for passage to the United Kingdom in the east-coast port of Halifax on board His Majesty's Transport *Adriatic*.

The Battalion was not to travel alone: on the ship were also the 64th Battalion of Canadian Infantry, the 8th Canadian Field Hospital – which assured medical services during the voyage – as well as the *Coburg Heavy Draft Battery*, for a total passenger list of just under two-thousand five-hundred souls. In fact, *Adriatic* was part of a three-ship convoy – with *Baltic* and *Empress of Britain* escorted by the Royal Navy cruiser *Cærnarvon* – with a total of eight-thousand, five-hundred ninety-seven military personnel passengers on board.



(Right above: *The RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Adriatic leaving Liverpool, likely at the time of her maiden voyage in 1908 – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*)

According to one source the vessel did not dock in the English west-coast port of Liverpool until April 10. On the other hand the War Diary of the 8th Canadian Field Ambulance records *Adriatic* reaching Liverpool at three o'clock on the afternoon of the 9th and also that the military personnel were travelling by train later on that same evening.

The 73rd Battalion's destination was East Sandling in the county of Kent. By that time the Canadians had established a large training complex, *Shorncliffe*, on the coastal area just down the Dover Straits from the port-harbour of Folkestone. There Private Hickey was attached to the 11th Canadian Reserve Brigade for the following four weeks.



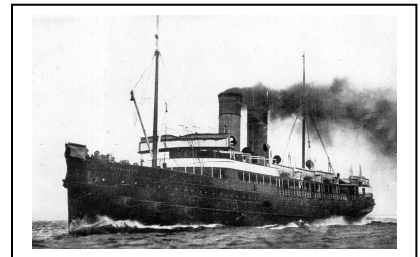
(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

That fleeting posting to *Shorncliffe* came to a conclusion on May 6 when the Battalion was transferred to another Canadian establishment, this one in the southern county of Hampshire in the vicinity of the villages of Bramshott and Liphook, the former lending its name to the encampment.

It was at *Camp Bramshott* that Private Hickey and his 73rd Battalion became an element of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the fledgling Canadian 4th Division and began training for a future role on the Continent.

The writing of a will was often a precursor of a move overseas or of a transfer to *active service* for a first time. In the case of Private Hickey it was on June 9 that he was prevailed upon to do so, bequeathing his all to his father – and it was a precursor.

He and his Battalion sailed on HM Transport *Copenhagen* from Southampton just over a month later, on August 12, before disembarking at Le Havre, the French port-city on the estuary of the River Seine, on August 13*, the following day.



(Right above: *The image of Copenhagen is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

**It was at this time that the majority of the units of the newly-formed 4th Canadian Division disembarked in France from England.*

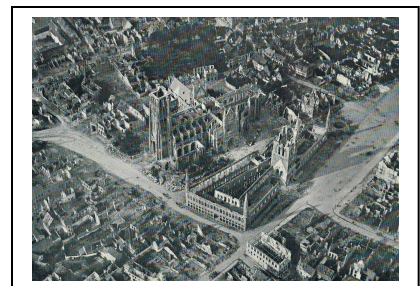
(Right below: *The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

Early in the war, the Canadians had established at Le Havre – and were to later do so again at nearby Étapes - the first of what, by the end of the conflict, was to have become a number of base depots. These depots were at least partially conceived for the purpose of receiving re-enforcements shipped from the United Kingdom and thereupon despatching them to their designated units or postings in the forward areas.



Thus Private Hickey's 73rd Battalion spent two days at the Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre before travelling northward on two trains. As with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions which had preceded it, the 4th Canadian Division was to serve, albeit briefly, in the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

Passing through the larger French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, the unit eventually detrained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe. The 73rd Battalion had arrived in the rear area of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War* and where Canadian forces had already been stationed on several occasions since their arrival on the Continent.



(continued)

(Previous page: *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 little left standing. – from Illustration*)

In the case of the 73rd Battalion, any service in the trenches of *the Salient* or of other sectors was limited. Possibly its worst experience – at least the only one entered into the War Diary – occurred on August 15 when... *On the Ypres Road they came under shell fire from the Germans when the following casualties occurred: 3 Officers Killed, 7 Other Ranks Killed, 16 Other Ranks Wounded*

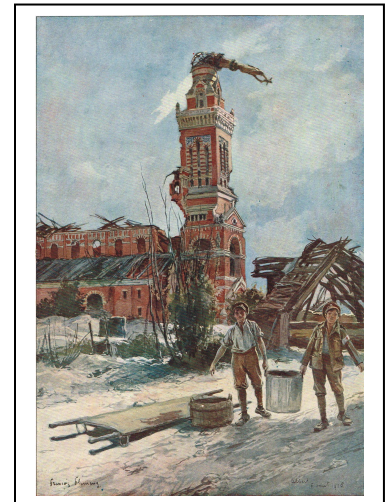
Private Hickey apparently remained in this rear area until the end of the month when the entire Battalion was sent to the 58th Brigade of the British 19th Division for instruction in trench fighting, 'A' Company finding itself attached to the 6th Battalion of the Wiltshire Regiment.

Relieved on September 10, and then again sent forward to the same front-line positions on the 14th, the 73rd Battalion was subsequently withdrawn on the 23rd, nine days later. Private Hickey's short experience of life in the *Ypres Salient* thus drew to a close. The Battalion casualties for the month of September had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – unusually light for *the Salient*.

The troops which arrived to take the place of the Canadians on that September 23 were Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting in the first battle to be designated by that name.

After several days of changing billets, the 73rd Battalion spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations. It was soon to be the turn of the unit and of Private Hickey to also fight at *the Somme*.

On October 3 the Battalion marched to nearby Arques where it entrained. On the following day it arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from where it marched in pouring rain to Beauval where billets had been prepared to receive it. On the succeeding days the unit marched again: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it underwent a period of training, then on the 13th through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at Tara Hill where it... *Bivouaced (sic) in a muddy field (War Diary)*... and provided various working parties for the next dozen or so days.

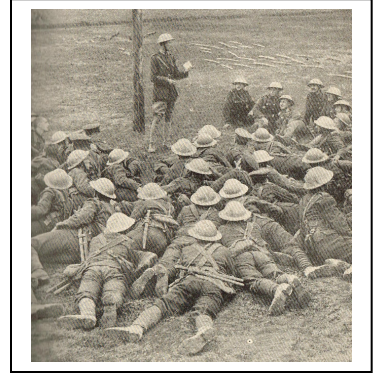


(Right above: *Canadian soldiers at work in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

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

On that first day 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 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 final instructions to the troops under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, 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 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 Courcelette.

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



The 73rd Battalion arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene – including those who had fought at Flers-Courcelette - were being withdrawn, in several cases this having been necessitated by the high incidence of casualties.

On October 26, Private Hickey's Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now no more than mounds of debris - of Pozières and Contalmaison.

(Right: A post-War image of what was left of Pozières: the monument receding into the mist still stands - as is shown in the photograph immediately below – in commemoration of the sacrifice of the Australian troops fighting at the Somme in 1916. – above from a vintage post-card; below from 2016)



There the unit remained in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when it moved forward once more, some of its number being *in support* at a junction of two trench systems. This was to prove to be a short tour which terminated on the night of November 2-3; there had been no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery had apparently been busy at times: casualties had amounted to eight *killed*, forty-three *wounded* and twenty-six others evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.



(Right below: *Evacuating Canadian casualties to the rear in hand-carts after the battle – somewhere on the Somme – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72nd and 73rd to lead in this attack...*

Thus, on November 11, the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*



(Right: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets – from Illustration*)

In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, the attack by the Canadians was not to be delivered as planned. Instead, the various units were ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear re-enforced by information elicited from German prisoners.



It would appear that neither side moved, and that the Canadians spent two days preparing for something that never came about. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides influenced the decision(s) not to attack.

On the night of November 13-14, the 73rd Battalion was withdrawn, its place taken in the line by the 47th Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period had been, all told, fourteen *killed* and thirty-eight *wounded*.



(Right: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

On or about November 18 the *1st Battle of the Somme* came to a halt, the last major action having been the capture of the village of Beaumont by the 51st Highland Division. But there was still sporadic fighting, and attacks were at least planned locally by both sides.

For example, on November 19... *Battalion equipped for the trenches and issued with rubber boots proceeded to trenches and held same line as previous tour... November 20... Orders received for the battalion to stand in readiness to attack for the purpose of capturing a portion of DESIRE Trench held by Germans...Attack ordered for 22nd at dusk... November 21... Sniping by the Germans becoming more active... November 22... Attack cancelled by the Brigade owing to certain trenches not having been completed in sufficient time for this battalion to make the attack...*

(casualties)

Despite the last-minute cancellation of that attack, casualties for this tour were nonetheless eight *killed in action* and forty *wounded*.

Thus it continued in much the same fashion until the 29th day of November when the 73rd Battalion of the 12th Infantry Brigade of the Canadian 4th Division became the last Canadian formation to retire from the battlefields of *the Somme*. On that day it took motorized transport from Oivillers to Varennes – and from there began to march.

Its itinerary took it westwards at first, then northwards past the western side of the city of Arras and beyond: Ampliers, Barly, Vacquerie-le-Broucq, Bailleul-aux-Cornailles and thence to Ruitz into which community it marched at four o'clock in the afternoon of December 4.



(Right: *the remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place), Arras, during the early days of the Great War – from Illustration*)

It was there that the Battalion was to be billeted until the 22nd of the month, in quarters that apparently left something to be desired – it may have been some consolation for the *other ranks* that the billets for the officers were reported as not being any better.

The Battalion War Diary for the months of January and February records the 73rd Battalion having spent a total of forty-one days in the line during those two months. On February 4 a local raid had been undertaken – the High Command was fond of them, the ordinary soldier was not so keen: a congratulatory message was received from the upper echelons on the supposed success of the venture as well as condolences for the number of casualties incurred – sixteen *killed*, twelve *wounded*.



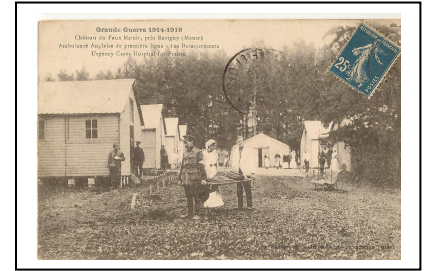
A further raid took place on March 1: a more ambitious undertaking. On this occasion the total number of *killed*, *wounded* and *missing* was one-hundred sixty-one.

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

Subsequent to this incident, the next two weeks were spent by Private Hickey's Battalion in intensive training in areas behind the lines. Following that, from the middle to the end of the month, the unit was sent up to the forward areas. On the final day of March the 73rd Battalion was withdrawn once again.

During that latter period in the lines, however, Private Hickey had been in need of medical attention. March 18th had been a day of little fighting, but working-parties had been busy, not least of all in digging trenches. There is no report in the War Diary of the casualty count of the day but there were at least three: two officers wounded by a sentry who had mistaken them for the enemy, and Private Hickey.

He was evacuated on that day to the 12th Canadian Field Ambulance in the vicinity of Cabaret Rouge. There Private Hickey was to remain for six days for treatment to a lacerated nose and a wounded left wrist before being discharged to duty on March 24.



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

(Right below: Some of the seven-thousand graves to be found in Cabaret Rouge Cemetery, mostly transferred to there after the Great War from other burial grounds: a high percentage who lie therein are Canadian, and it was from this particular cemetery that Canada's Unknown Soldier was exhumed to return home. – photograph from 2010)

Three days spent towards the rear at Chateau de la Haie were then succeeded by a further posting to the front.

By this time the British spring offensive was imminent – the artillery barrage was in full flow - and the Battalion's posting was in an area facing a long crest of land occupied by the enemy, a position which dominated the Douai Plain to the eastwards: Vimy Ridge.



On April 8 the Battalion spent the day moving forward into its assembly positions which were attained by half-past three in the morning of the April 9. One-hundred twenty minutes later the attack commenced.

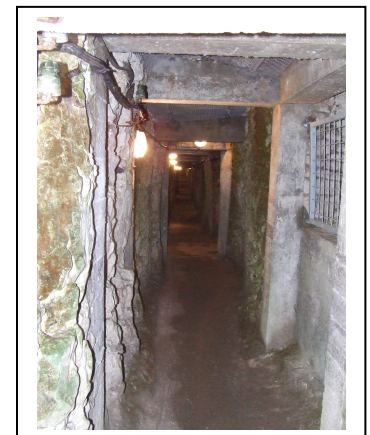
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive 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.

(Right above: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

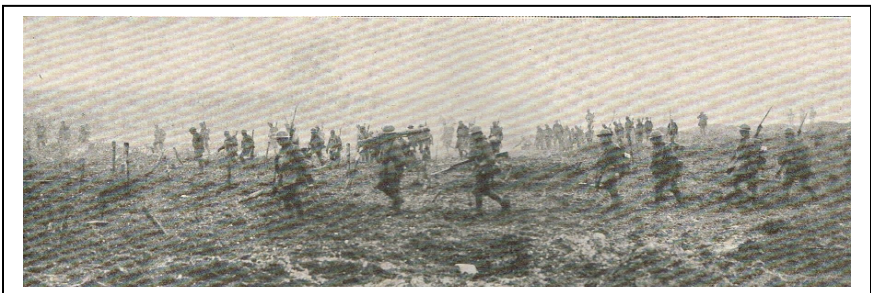
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade placed under Canadian command - had stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having rid it almost entirely of its German occupants*.



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(Preceding page: *Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later. – photograph from 2008(?)*)

(Right: *Canadian troops of either the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)



**While Battalions of the Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions attacked the Ridge itself, the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions had the responsibility of clearing the slope to the south-east.*

On April 10 the Canadians, having finished clearing the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance, had begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the habitual German counter-attacks – attacks which for the most part did not materialize.

Excerpt from the 73rd Battalion War Diary for April 9, 1917: Promptly at 5.30 A.M. the mines in GUNNER and KENNEDY CRATERS were blown; our barrage opened and C Coy lead (sic) the way out of the assembly trenches towards the German Lines. The men advanced in excellent order and officers who watched the advance from our lines stated that it was carried out like a drill movement. No time was lost and the men advanced behind our barrage and as soon as the barrage lifted from the German trench our men occupied the enemy front line...Our troops were occupying their objective at 5.37 A.M...

This of course was only the first of several objectives and the attack was to continue during the remainder of the morning and afternoon – and by the end of the following day the troops of the 73rd Battalion were, as were those elsewhere, busy consolidating. The total casualty count of Private Hickey's unit had been eighty-eight of whom nine had been *killed in action* or had *died of wounds*.

There had been, on those two days, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved logistically impossible. Thus the Germans had closed the breach and the conflict once more had reverted to one of inertia.

(Right: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear by Canadian troops during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)



The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was thus not to be fought in the manner of the first two days and by the end of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

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In reading some of the 73rd Battalion War Diary Appendices, it becomes apparent that for some time the Highland Battalions recruited in the province of Québec had been experiencing recruitment problems. These had become critical during the early spring of 1917 after Vimy, and thus Private Hickey found himself transferred to the 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) on April 19. The 73rd Battalion was to be dis-banded, its personnel dispersed to other units.

Excerpts from the 73rd Battalion War Diary entry of April 19 of 1917: *At 9.00 o'clock the men to be transferred to the 13th and 42nd Battalions were paraded in marching order ready for departure... the Commanding Officer of the 42nd B'n very kindly sent his Pipe Band to meet the men transferred to his Command.*

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(Right below: *Canadian Scottish troops on the march on the Continent in the spring or summer of 1917, escorted by a pipe band – from Le Miroir*)

The 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), also recruited in the Montreal area among the English-speaking population, was a unit of the 7th Brigade of Canadian Infantry of the 3rd Canadian Division. The Division itself had arrived in France piecemeal during the autumn of 1915 - some units even reporting *to duty* in the late winter of 1915-1916 - and had officially come into being at midnight of December 31 of 1915, and January 1, 1916.

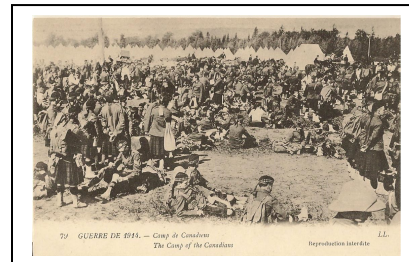


(Right: *The personnel of the 42nd Battalion of Canadian Infantry wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site*)

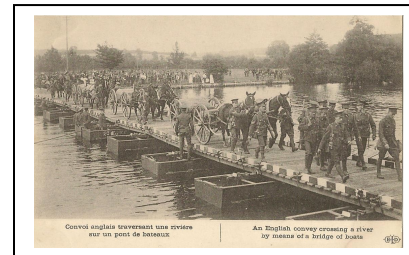


**The other battalions of the 7th Brigade were the 49th (Edmonton Regiment), the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) and the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment).*

(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)



During the winter of 1915-1916 and into the spring and summer of 1916, the Battalion served in Belgium, at first just to the north of the Franco-Belgian frontier with the Canadian 1st Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector*, and then, as of March and April, 1916, in the *Ypres Salient* where it was responsible for an area to the south-east of the city itself.



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(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 early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card)

Private Hickey’s previous unit, the 73rd Battalion, had experienced the hardships of the Somme and the opening stages of the *Battle of Arras* – for which it was to receive battle honours – as well as the everyday grind of life in the trenches.

However, some two months before Private Hickey had set foot on the Continent in the summer of 1916, the 42nd Battalion had earned its first such honour at *Mount Sorrel*, where it had undergone its baptism of fire.

From June 2 to 14 of 1916 was to be fought 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. 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)

(Right below: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the southwest 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.



Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion being better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.



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

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The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, of which the 42nd Battalion was a component, was to be in the thick of it all. Excerpts from its War Diary take up the story:

2nd to 6th June – On the morning of the 2nd the enemy opened up a severe bombardment on our front, support and communicating trenches, commencing at 7.45 a.m. and keeping up an intense fire until noon when he launched an attack against our trenches. The artillery preparation had been so severe that he succeeded in penetrating our trenches and by evening of that day he was in possession of a good deal of our front and support trenches...

Counter attacks were made and succeeded in driving the enemy out of a portion of our trenches but owing to the difficulties of getting up reinforcements were unable to hold the ground recovered... The casualties suffered during the engagement were somewhat heavy in both officers and men...

The Battalion casualty count from June 2 to 6 (inclusive) during the confrontation had been thirty-one *killed in action*, wounded two-hundred twenty-seven, and twenty *missing in action* (some to return). Among the other three battalions of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade losses had been comparable and it was decided to withdraw the unit in order to re-organize and to re-enforce.



(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916-1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: Still nursing the scars of a hundred years ago, it is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government – photograph from 2014*)

Thus not only was the Brigade retired from the area of *Mount Sorrel*, but it was ordered to leave the Divisional Rest Camp and proceed to billets in and about the northern French community of Steenvoorde. It was to play no further role in the action.

The next major confrontation between the 42nd Battalion and the German Army was to take place months later at *the Somme* where the unit, after having spent two weeks for training in the area of the northern French community of Cassel, arrived on September 13.

Only two days later, it had been thrown into the attack at Flers-Courcelette. This operation by the 42nd Battalion on September 15 was one of the few successes on that day. The continuation of the attack on the following day, however, had been less so: total casualties for the two days, seventy-four *killed in action*, two-hundred ninety-eight *wounded in action*, sixty-six *missing in action*.

From September 23 to 28, the 42nd Battalion was to be marching. The unit had left Albert to return there five days afterwards. None of the War Diaries of a number of other units which also marched in a like manner provide any apparent reason for all this movement: it may simply have been to liberate billeting space for newly-arriving units, whereas those marching were being allowed a reprieve – at least from being shot at - after the extremely hard fighting that they had encountered.

The final three days of September and October 1 had been spent in billets in Albert before the 42nd Battalion was ordered to return to the forward area. On October 5 it relieved the 43rd Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front line. This tour was to be the last that the 42nd Battalion would spend in trenches on *the Somme*. Three days later, on the 9th, one of its last duties having been to provide stretcher-bearers to bring in wounded from No-Man's-Land, the unit withdrew.



(Right above: *A stretcher-bearer going about his business, likely after an infantry action: although not bearing arms, these men were subject to all the dangers of the battlefield, often for extended periods of time. – from Illustration*)

On October 10, as other Canadian forces – including Private Hickey's 73rd Battalion - were arriving in the theatre of *the Somme*, the 42nd Battalion was beginning a thirteen-day withdrawal on foot – to the west before turning north to pass behind Arras - to arrive in the Neuville-St-Vaast Sector, north-west of that fore-mentioned city. There the unit immediately took over front-line duties from the PPCLI.



(Right above: *The city of Arras was to endure four years of bombardment during the Great War; the Grand'Place (Grande Place) already looked like this by March of 1917 and more was to follow. – from Le Miroir*)

The winter of 1916-1917 had passed for the 42nd Battalion in much the same manner as it had for the other battalions of the Canadian Corps in those sectors between Arras and Béthune. As April approached, the training schedules undertaken by Private Hickey's 73rd Battalion were to also be a part of the 42nd Battalion's preparations for the attack at Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the *Battle of Arras*.

As for the events of April 9, 1917, and its aftermath, of a strength of some seven-hundred twenty before the attack, just over three hundred were to be reported as casualties by the 42nd Battalion War Diarist three days later in his entry of April 11. The Battalion was relieved in the evening of the same day and was withdrawn to Villers au Bois.



(Right above: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)

On April 20 the 42nd Battalion received orders to move back into Corps Reserve, this likely being the occasion during which Private Hickey was to report *to duty* with his new unit.

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After the *official* conclusion of the *Battle of Arras* on May 15, both sides returned 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: Canadian troops serving as a carrying-party, one of the many duties assigned to units when they were not manning the forward areas – from Le Miroir)



During the latter part of April and the months of May and June, the 42nd Battalion, when stationed in the forward areas, found itself remaining in the area of Vimy, even at times in the tunnel system that had been constructed for the attack of April 9*. The unit was apparently active at the time, particularly in June when it undertook several raids on the German positions facing it.



**On occasion it was Grange Tunnel – see photograph some pages above.*

(Right above: The 42nd Battalion also served in the vicinity of La Chaudière from where today may be seen the Canadian National Memorial standing on Vimy Ridge. On April 9, 1917, the Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions attacked from the other side of the slope: the photographer is standing on what was German-occupied ground at the time. – photograph from 2014)

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – as well as his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

(Right above: An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Miroir)

One of the first primary objectives of the Canadian campaign was to be *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the mining centre of Lens. However, the principal Canadian players were to be the 1st and 2nd Divisions, the majority of the units of the 3rd and 4th Divisions being only peripherally involved or not at all.

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.



Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.

Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.



These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands*.

(Right: *A 220 mm. Canadian artillery piece, under camouflage on the Lens Front in the summer of 1917, being readied for use – from Le Miroir*)



**The Canadian efforts had been expected to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and then the Canadians were ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.*

(Right above: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)

The 42nd Battalion, however, was one of the units not to be involved *at all* and at that particular time Private Hickey and his comrades-in-arms were in fact far behind the lines and indulging in a series of sports events. As far as anything of military importance on August 15 was concerned, the Battalion War Diarist was excessively sparing with his ink: there is no entry whatsoever for the day.

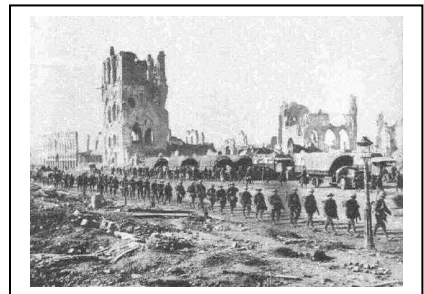
(continued)

And in the meantime, far from preparing for a confrontation with the German Army, Private Hickey was enjoying – one may presume – a ten-day period of leave in the French capital from August 3 until August 14.

The Canadian-led offensive campaign, of which the capture of *Hill 70* was but a part, had apparently been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and New Zealanders, and then the Canadians, were ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.

It was some nine weeks after the capture of *Hill 70*, on October 16, that the 42nd Battalion began to make its way by train, to the area of the Franco-Belgian border. Later that day, Private Hickey was being billeted in the area of the northern French town of Hazebrouck.

(Right: *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*)



(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere or everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)



But it was not to be until October 23, having travelled in a circuitous route on foot and by train that the 42nd Battalion was to find itself in the ruins of the railway station at Ypres.

(Right: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)



Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign into which the Canadians were about to be flung – already ongoing since the end of that July of 1917 - came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.



(Right above: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians standing in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)



(Right below: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument at right – photograph from 2010*)

From October 23 until the end of the month the 42nd Battalion was in reserve in the area of Sin Jaan contributing to carrying-parties, working-parties and stretcher-parties. On October 30 it was ordered forward and was involved peripherally, as a reserve, in an advance by the Canadian Corps.



Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary take up the story: *October 30th: The Battalion received word at 1.00 p.m. that working-parties for the day were cancelled, and that the men were to stand to. At 2.00 p.m...orders for the Battalion to move up... The Battalion moved off at 3.00 p.m. The men were bivouacked (sic) at ABRAHAM HEIGHTS.*

October 31st: ...The Battalion received instructions to move forward and take over the Brigade front line from the 49th Cdn. Bn., and P.P.C.L.I., and that they would be called on to carry out an operation to rectify the front line, 2 Companies of the R.C.R. to be attached in support...

Casualties while on ABRAHAM HEIGHTS were heavy considering the shortness of our stay there, and were attributable to the fact that the locality was very exposed and was consistently shelled.

The son of Michael J. Hickey – to whom he had willed his all, and to whom since April 1 of 1916 he had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - and of Mary Hickey (deceased 1909) of 38 (36?), Flower Hill, St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Katie and to Patrick-J.*.

Private Hickey was reported as having been *killed in action* of October 31 of 1917 during the fighting at *Passchendaele*.



(Previous page: *A family memorial which stands in Belvedere Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's, Newfoundland, commemorates the life and sacrifice of Private David J. Hickey. – photograph from 2015*)

**And perhaps to William, Maud and Arthur-Joseph*

(continued)

David J. Hickey had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty years and eleven months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, January 6, 1895.

Private David J. Hickey 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.