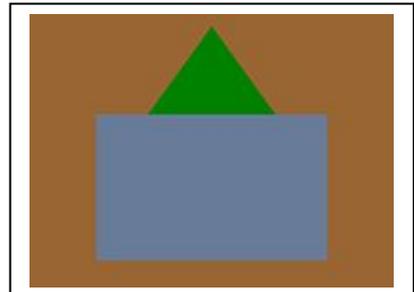




Private Wilson Jonathan Hickman (Number 902211) of the 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Maple Copse Cemetery: Grave reference, Special Memorial C. 7..

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

(continued)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of a *fisherman* then *fireman** and *labourer*, Wilson Jonathan Hickman had immigrated from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia by the year 1906, as on November 24 of that year he married a Miss Lillian (*Lily*) Riggs in the town of Truro.

**Whether the fireman who keeps the fire alive for steam engines or the one who extinguishes other fires is not documented.*

On April 1 of 1916 he both enlisted and attested in Westville, Pictou County, in the area of New Glasgow, before presenting himself for medical examination a week later, on April 8. Sixteen days later again, on April 24, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by Lieutenant-Colonel John Stanfield, the officer commanding the 193rd Overseas Battalion (*Cumberland Highlanders*) – to which unit Private Hickman had been attached* – when he declared – on paper - that...*Wilson J. Hickman...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Initially remaining at Truro, the site of Battalion Headquarters, on May 23 Private Hickman and his Company were transferred to *Camp Aldershot* in King's County to complete their training with the 193rd and the three other battalions of the newly-authorized *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade*.

**His first pay record, while confirming the date of Private Hickman's enlistment, also records him as having been taken on strength on the same day by the 193rd Battalion.*

His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister ship of *Britannic* – to be sunk in the Mediterranean Sea in that November of 1916 – and of the ill-starred *Titanic*, was at the time one of the world's largest passenger ships. She needed to be in order to carry the number of troops that were to pour into her on October 11, 12 and 13, for passage to the United Kingdom: *Olympic* was to carry not only the personnel of the 193rd Battalion, but also those of the 85th, the 188th, the 219th and the 185th Battalions, plus one-half of the 166th Battalion, all of Canadian Infantry.

With the addition of some three hundred miscellaneous others who also took passage on her, the vessel was to provide passage to the United Kingdom for about six-thousand five-hundred souls. She eventually cleared the port of Halifax at eleven o'clock on the morning of that October 13, 1916. Six days later, on October 18, she docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool, the troops then disembarking on the morrow.



(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HM Hospital Ship Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay on the Greek island of Lemnos in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

(continued)

From Liverpool, Private Hickman's unit was transported to *Witley Camp* in the southern extreme of the English county of Surrey for yet further training. There appears to be nothing in Private Hickman's file *a propos* the seven weeks that he spent there except that on November 30 he wrote a Will. His real estate he left to... *My wife Mrs. Lillian Hickman to hold while she remains a widow and on her death to son C. Wilson Hickman of North Sydney*. His personal estate he bequeathed to his wife *and* children.

On December 5 Private Hickman was transferred on paper to the 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), and transferred physically to France on the same day – likely via Southampton and the French port-city of Le Havre - there to report to the Canadian General Base Depot.

When he was despatched from the Depot to report to his new unit is not clear. The only report in the 42nd Battalion War Diary of re-enforcements reporting *to duty* during the period suggested, is to be found in the entry of December 8: *150 un-trained O.R. Reinforcements were received and were attached to the 7th Brigade Training Battalion for instruction**.



**But the date of his departure from the Canadian Base Depot to join his unit appears to have been December 12 according to his own files. Nothing else it would seem has been recorded among his available papers.*

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

* * * * *

His new unit, the 42nd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), was a component of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade*, itself an element of the Canadian 3rd Division. The Battalion itself had been on the Continent since October 9 of 1915 when it had landed in France, but the Brigade and Division had not been formed officially until the mid-night of December 31 of that year and January 1, 1916.

**The other battalions of the 7th Brigade were the 49th (Edmonton Regiment), the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) Battalion and the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment) Battalion. In the case of the latter two units, the term 'Battalion' is not often applied but each of these regiments put just a single battalion in the field.*

In the winter of 1915-1916 and into the spring and summer of 1916, the Battalion had served in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, just north of the Franco-Belgian frontier and, as of the end of March, in the *Ypres Salient*. The first five months of its service on the Continent had therefore comprised the day-by-day drudgery and dangers, routines and rigours of trench warfare during the Great War*.

(continued)



****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.

(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the that year 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)

The first major infantry altercation in which the 42nd Battalion had played a role was to be the confrontation fought in June of 1916 at and about *Mount Sorrel*.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* remaining under British (and thus also Canadian) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: *Mount Sorrel*.



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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were to successfully re-organize their defences.



On the other hand, the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly coordinated, had proved a costly experience for the Canadians.

(Right above: The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914)



(Right: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)

The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade had been in the midst of it all. Excerpts from the 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 42nd Battalion had incurred a total of two-hundred seventy-eight casualties up until the night of June 5-6 when the 7th Brigade was withdrawn. It was to play no further part in the affair. On the night of June 12-13 the Canadians had organized and then had delivered what would prove to be a final – and successful – counter-attack. After eleven days of fighting the two sides had ended up for the most part where they had started.

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

(Right: Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014)



From that time on until the end of August had been a quiet time for the Canadians – as quiet as it ever became in the *Ypres Salient*. There had been no further concerted infantry activity by either side, only patrols and raids organized and fought on a local scale. The daily toll of casualties had been mostly due to enemy artillery and snipers.

On August 22 the 7th Brigade had retired to rest billets in the Cassel area. In fact, there was to be little rest involved; the following two weeks had been spent in training in preparation for deployment in a different theatre. The Canadians were to move south to *the Somme*.

By that 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 having cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

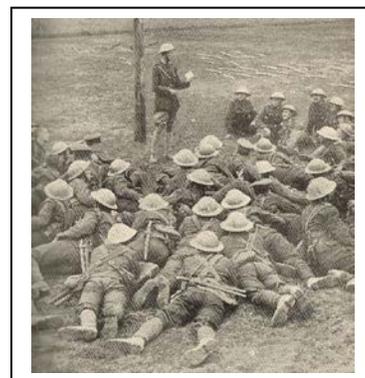


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(Preceding page: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette* – photograph from 2015)

On the first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been 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 a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be 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 Courcelette.

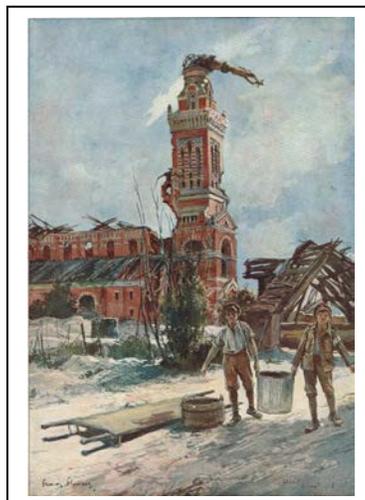


(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916.* – from *The War Illustrated*)

Meanwhile, having left the north of France on the morning of September 7, the 42nd Battalion had arrived on September 13 at the large military complex which had already been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

On the morning of September 15 the Battalion had still been at *Brickfields Camp*. By late afternoon it had moved forward into its assembly area and then into its jumping-off positions. Its attack on Courcelette was to go in at six o'clock that evening.

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



Excerpt from 42nd Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916:

ATTACK *The position of assembly was reached and all in readiness for the attack at 5.50 pm. The attacking companies went over the top at exactly zero hour.*

OBJECTIVES *The first objective SUNKEN ROAD was reached – also the 2nd i.e. FABECK GRABEN TRENCH without heavy casualties, and immediately steps were taken to clear the trench, reverse the parapet and consolidate...*

This operation by the 42nd Battalion on the 15th was one of the few that were successful on that day. The continuation of the attack on the following day was 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*.

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)



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

On September 26 there was to be Canadian involvement in a further offensive but one in which the 42nd Battalion was not to participate. Instead it was to be sent on a march, a return journey into the British rear area. In doing so, billets would be freed for the soldiers now incoming to fight the upcoming *Battle of Thiepval Ridge*.

Thus it was on September 23 that the 42nd Battalion left Albert, to march, to train and to be billeted until the 28th day of the month when it had returned to Albert. By that time the offensive had concluded and there were sufficient billets, alas, for the returning battalions – battalions because, of course, the 42nd had not been the only unit to have been ordered to trek during those five days.

While the Battalion was to return yet again to the forward areas and was to suffer subsequent casualties, the action at Courcellette was the first and last major action fought by the unit during *First Somme*. Its casualties during the final days at the Somme, October 2 to 9, had been twenty-four *killed* and seventy *wounded*.



On October 10, as other Canadian forces – mainly of the 4th Canadian Division – had been arriving, the 42nd Battalion was to be beginning a thirteen-day withdrawal on foot from there to the Neuville-St-Vaast Sector, north-west of the city of Arras, where it immediately took over front-line positions from the PPCLI.



(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916. – from Illustration*)

His new unit was serving in reserve positions at nearby Bois-des-Alleux, when Private Hickman reported *to duty*.

* * * * *

Having reported *to duty* in December of 1916, Private Hickman was to remain with “D” Company of the 42nd Battalion until only the first day of the New Year, 1917. On that January 1 he was attached to the 2nd Tunnelling Company of the Canadian Engineers, a newly-formed unit and newly-arrived at the front - underneath which it was to operate*. He was unfortunately not to serve for long.

**The unit was, from the outset of its service in early 1916, used in conjunction with British tunnellers and served in Belgium, based at Reninghelst, and while in the field often in the area of Mount Sorrel. There preparations were already underway for the 'Battle of the Messines Ridge', the precursor of the 'Third Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele'. It was to remain in this area and served at neither 'the Somme' or 'Vimy Ridge'.*

Casualty report: He was attached to the 2nd Tunnelling Company and died from suffocation when a fire broke out in one of the galleries of a mine at Mount Sorrel, near Ypres, about 10.40 P.M., on February 14th, 1917.

(Right: The sacrifice of Private Wilson Johnathan Hickman is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the community of Grand Bank. - photograph from 2015)

The son of Charles Hickman, labourer, and of Eleanor Hickman (née *Forsey*)*, of Grand Bank, Newfoundland, he was also husband to Lillian (née *Riggs*) of Westville – later Box 62, North Sidney - and father to Charles-Wilson, to Florence, Mary and to Nellie of North Sydney, Nova Scotia.

**The couple married October 13, 1864, and Wilson-Jonathan was to have had – he apparently the youngest – seven siblings: Amelia-Forsey, Emma-Jane, George-Edward, Elizabeth-Rose, Dinah-Ann, Esther-Foote and Harriet-Patten.*

Private (*Sapper*) Hickman was reported as having *died of suffocation – accidentally killed in the field* – on February 15 of 1917.

Wilson Jonathan Hickman had enlisted at the *apparent age* of thirty-one years and eight months: date of birth in Grand Bank, Newfoundland, August 14, 1884 (from attestation papers and also Methodist Parish Records).

Private Wilson Jonathan Hickman was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

Note: The ground was to be fought over again in 1918. The following note is written on his **Casualty Report:** *On reconstruction of cemetery his grave could not be found and a 'Memorial Cross' erected to his memory is inscribed 'buried in this cemetery but actual grave unknown'.*

