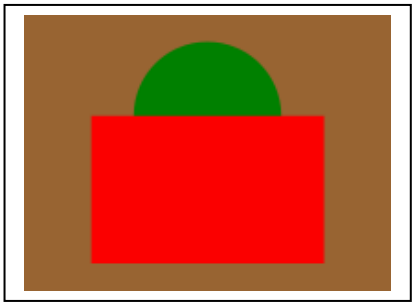
Lance Corporal William John Hillier, MM, (Number 7863) of the 2nd Battalion (*Eastern Ontario*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Crouy British Cemetery (Crouy-sur-Somme): Grave reference VI.C.19.



(Right: *The image of the 2nd Battalion shoulder-flash is from the Wikipedia web-site*.)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *painter*, William John Hillier appears to have left no information to posterity *a propos* his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. *Ancestry.ca* has on file a William J. Hillier from New Harbour, Newfoundland – his father Robert – on his way to Boston from Ottawa via Montreal and St. Albans, Vermont, in or about the year 1910 – but that is all.

No more documentation appears to be available until he enlisted at *Camp Valcartier* in August of 1914. His first pay-records show that it was on the eighth day of that month that the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services. They also show that he was taken on strength on the same date by the Governor General's Foot Guards, this being a regiment of the Canadian Militia* which was soon absorbed by the newly-authorized 2nd Battalion (*Eastern Ontario*) of the Canadian Infantry.

Militia regiments were organized for Home Defence only and precluded from operating outside the frontiers of the country, therefore volunteers recruited by them were transferred to the newly-forming Battalions, formations which were destined for overseas service.

Private Hillier apparently did not undergo a medical examination until August 26 at which time the Medical Officer considered him…*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.* The examination took place also at *Camp Valcartier*, Québec, where he had enlisted and where he was to attest later, on September 22. On that date the formalities of his enlistment were concluded by the 2nd Battalion's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel David Watson, who declared - on paper - that…*having finally been approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

(Right: *Canadian artillery being put through its paces at the Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War*. – photograph (from a later date in the war) from *The War Illustrated*)

There was to be little time for training for the 2nd Battalion in Canada; this would have to be done once the formation had arrived in the United Kingdom. It was to be only days after his attestation – it may well have been on September 22 - that the 2nd Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Cassandra* at Québec for trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.

Apparently also travelling – and recorded as having boarded *Cassandra* on September 25 - was a part of the personnel of the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance*, the remainder to sail on accompanying vessels.

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

If *Cassandra* followed the example – or perhaps it was she who *set* it – of other vessels, then, having weighed anchor in the Port of Quebec, the vessel then was to *drop* it again a few minutes later.

On or about September 25, once having embarked their military personnel passengers, a number of ships then sailed *upstream* some two kilometres from Quebec City to spend the next few days in Wolfe's Cove.

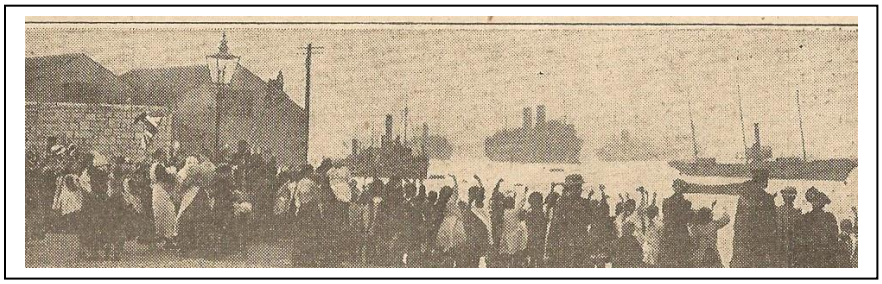
Whenever it was that *Cassandra* sailed from Québec – a number of the ships did so on September 30 - it was only to anchor days later further downstream, at the Gaspé. There the gathering convoy of thirty-one transports and its naval escort organized itself for the trans-Atlantic crossing and finally sailed from Canadian waters on October 3.

Whether Private Hillier was aware of it or not is not documented but, on October 5, as the formation was passing along the south coast of Newfoundland, the small Bowring Brothers' steamer *Florizel*, carrying the *First Five-Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment overseas, sailed to meet it and join it.

The convoy reached its destination, the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport, on October 14. However, such was the poor organization of the port at that time, that some troops were to remain on board their ship for several days before disembarking. In fact the convoy had been sailing for Southampton but a submarine scare had brought about a change in plans and Plymouth-Devonport, undergoing refitting and renovations, was used – *faute de mieux*.

Private Hillier's 2nd Battalion was one of those to spend the longest amount of time in the harbour on board ship: while the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance personnel landed on October 15, the 2nd Battalion was not to set foot on land until October 25, whereupon it was transported by train to the Salisbury Plain.

The 2nd Battalion War Diarist concludes his entry for that October 25 by noting that the subsequent railway journey was not to start until almost two o'clock on the following morning, to arrive at the *train's* destination at seven-thirty a.m.



***Bustard Camp*, the *unit's* destination, was yet a further five or six hours' march distant, and was to be undertaken on foot.**

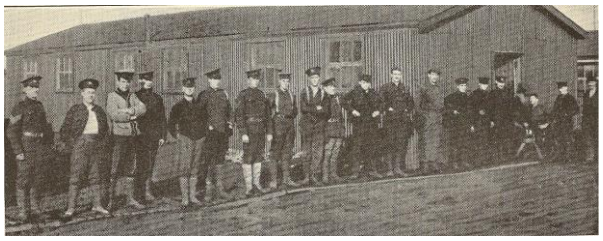
(Preceding page: *The convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914* – from *The War Illustrated*)

The Army Regulations of the day were such that troops were to undergo some fourteen weeks of training from the time of enlistment; at that point they were to be considered as being fit for *active service*.

(continued)

Thus the newly-arrived Canadians were to spend the remainder of October and up until the first week of February, 1915, in becoming proper *Soldiers of the King* – even if they were *colonials*.

On February 4 the Canadian Division* marched to a review area where they were inspected by His Majesty, King George V and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener. The next few days were spent in final preparation for departure then, on February 7, the 2nd Battalion boarded a train to take it to the English west-coast port of Avonmouth.**



Designated as such until, logically, the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division, when it became the 1st Canadian Division.

****For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener was named in 1916 – it had been called Berlin until then.***

(Right above: *Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire* – from *The War Illustrated*)

At Avonmouth, Port of Bristol, on the following day, the 2nd Battalion – by now a unit of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade - boarded HMT *Blackwell*, the ship then sailing as part of the Canadian Division Armada later that day. It was apparently a very rough and unpleasant voyage, the Battalion War Diary making a single mention of it… *Men very sick*. Three days later, on February 11, the vessel dropped anchor in the French port of St-Nazaire on the coast of Brittany, the Battalion disembarked and, by five o'clock on that same evening, was travelling northwards to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier.

For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. It was in the area of Armentières that the 2nd Battalion was introduced to the rigours and routines of trench warfare* by the North Staffordshire Regiment and the King's Royal Rifles – and to the harsher realities of combat when the unit suffered its first fatality on February 20.

****During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front. The unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.***

(continued)

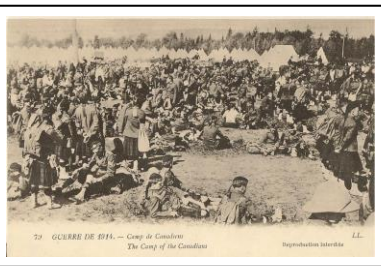
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Preceding page: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles* – from *Illustration*)

Two months later, the 2nd Battalion had then been posted to the *Ypres Salient* and it was on April 18, at or about twenty-five minutes past ten in the morning, that Private Hillier's unit – in fact, the entire 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade - was to cross the border into the *Kingdom of Belgium.*

The Brigade crossed the frontier to the west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe where it was to remain for two days before advancing eastwards to Vlamertinghe, there to stay for a further forty-eight hours. It was then that the Germans decided to launch their attack in an effort to take the nearby city of Ypres.

(Right: *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)



(Right below: *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)

Up until that time, during the few weeks of Canadian tenure, *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet. Then the dam broke - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it. The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte* (Ypres the Dead) – *By the end of the conflict there was little left standing.* – from *Illustration*)

The *2nd Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. It was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations.

But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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*)

The cloud was first 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. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, became necessary while, at the same time, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Infantry Brigade were moved forward to support the efforts of the French and of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade.

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

By the end of the second day of the attack, April 23, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan were to be held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement became necessary.

At times there were to be breeches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to forcing a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.

Private Hillier's 2nd Battalion remained attached to the 3rd Brigade in the north-eastern sector of *the Salient* until April 25 when it withdrew back towards Vlamertinghe and re-joined its parent 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade.

Having remained there to rest on the following day, the unit was then ordered forward to occupy positions near a pontoon bridge on the *Yser Canal*. Heavily shelled on the morrow, the Battalion subsequently returned to its billets at Vlamertinghe on the 29th.

(Right above: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade moved forward to its western bank – to the left - from Vlamertinghe* – photograph from 2014)

There it was to remain until May 3 when it was withdrawn further, to the northern French centre of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and re-organize.

(Right: *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)

On May 15 the 2nd Battalion was ordered to move further down the line via Colonne and Hinges to Béthune from where it was to advance three days afterwards towards the areas 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 having the same numbers of troops to put in the field – would happily not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered heavily*.

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

The nearby French effort – employing the same suicidal tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to 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.

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

On the final day of May the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion was relieved from its posting at Festubert and on June 1 was resting in billets in Essars; in another nine days' time it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant to the south of Festubert. Despatched into the forward trenches from June 11 to 17 to support British efforts, the unit incurred the same sort of results, although fewer in number – fourteen *killed in action*, seventy-nine *wounded* - from having repeated the same sort of tactical mistakes as at Festubert.

On June 17 the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area, Private Hillier's 2nd Battalion having been among the first to do so.

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.

(continued)

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 2nd Battalion was to march to billets in or near to the community of Oblinghem, two kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune. From there on June 25, it began to move towards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just to the north across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert, there the 2nd Battalion was to remain – as was the entire Canadian Division. During the next number of 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; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had this been otherwise.

(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)

The Canadian Division would then remain in that border area of Belgian West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient.*

During those months neither side made much concerted attempt to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches. As with all the other units at the front, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion's time was divided between postings to the front-line trenches, to the support positions, and into reserve. Casualties were caused mostly by artillery fire*, snipers, and the occasional raid on the enemy lines.

It is estimated that some sixty to seventy percent of the casualties of the Great War on the Western Front were due to artillery-fire.

But not long into the New Year, 1916, Private Hillier was to undergo an extended period of medical treatment and of convalescence.

*** * * * ***

On February 28 he was at first evacuated to the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance at nearby Dranoutre before being forwarded on the same day to the 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance at Bailleul (or perhaps nearby Mont des Cats) where he was one of fourteen admissions on the day for sickness. His complaint was there diagnosed as myalgia.

On March 11 Private Hillier was transferred to the North Midland (53rd) Casualty Clearing Station* at Bailleul from where on March 15, four days later, he was transported by the 12th Ambulance Train to the 26th General Hospital at Étaples. He arrived there to be admitted on the following day again.

In some of his files likely mis-identified as the Northumbrian CCS – at the time a hundred kilometres distant at Beauval.

(Preceding page: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere on the Continent during the early years of the War*: *Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature*. - from a vintage post-card)

It was a day short of seven weeks later, on May 3, that Private Hillier was discharged from hospital to report *to duty* at Base Details – likely at Le Havre. From there only four days later again he was despatched to re-join his unit which his papers – if not the Battalion War Diary – record that he did on May 8 at a time when the 2nd Battalion was serving in the Divisional Reserve.

*** * * * ***

From May 19 until the end of the month, the 2nd Battalion War Diarist saw fit to begin his entry of the day with the words… *Day quiet*. The single exception to this rule was May 24 when the report commenced… *Day exceptionally quiet.*

All of that was about to change.

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

This sector was at the time the responsibility of the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division. However, so rapidly evolved the seriousness of the situation that units from other formations were called upon to repel the German onslaught. The 2nd Battalion of the 1st Canadian Division was to be one of those.

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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, then proved a costly disaster for the Canadians.

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

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

The Battalion War Diary entry for June 3, 1916, reads as follows: ***Received orders at 3 AM and moved to Dickebusch Huts. In evening moved up to trenches and relieved the 14th & 15th Battalions in front line. Practically no trenches. Each man had dug himself in. Heavily shelled coming through Zillebeke.***

(Right: ***A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature*****. – photograph from 2014)**

Although no infantry action is recorded as having been undertaken by the 2nd Battalion up until and including June 7 when it was relieved and withdrew from the forward area, by that time it had been heavily shelled on all four days, had stood to in rain and mud in an exposed area and, once again according the War Diarist on June 6… ***The men are suffering from exposure.***

On the day of the unit's retirement, June 7, he also reported… ***Suffered 122 casualties during 4 day tour*****.**

On June 11, Private Hillier's Battalion once more moved up to the forward area and into the front lines to relieve the 24th Battalion. The War Diary entries for the two succeeding days read as follows: ***Trenches – 12/6/16 – Still holding trenches. 1:30 AM 13th & 16th Battns moved through on front & made attack (13 June) on enemy's position. During this attack losses were very heavy. Raining all day.***

13/6/16 - Still holding line. Heavy bombardments all day by enemy. Trenches completely wiped out. Rained all day. Very heavy casualties. Commenced to relieve the 13th Battn who were at this time holding the newly-won positions.

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

The confrontation having drawn to its close, life in the ***Ypres Salient*** **reverted to the everyday grind of existence at the front or behind it. There was little infantry activity by either side apart from the constant patrolling and the more and more occasional raids – particularly by the British-led forces whose High Command thought it was good for the troops - not exactly how the troops in question felt about them, it would appear.**

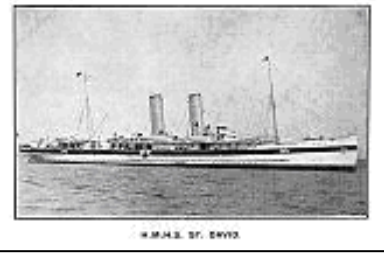
And there was the constant stream of casualties, as ever usually due to artillery fire and, less often to be sure, but always a deadly threat, the enemy's snipers.

Private Hillier became a casualty to the German artillery likely on August 1, a day when, having… ***worried the enemy all day with grenades & trench mortars…*** **the unit was…** ***Relieved at night by 16th Can Battn.*** **No other relevant information appears in the reports of the day.**

* * * * *

Evacuated thereupon to the 10th Casualty Clearing Station at the *Rémy Sidings* to the south of the Belgian town of Poperinghe, Private Hillier was there treated for a gun-shot wound to his right-hand side inflicted by enemy shrapnel. He was subsequently transferred to the 13th General Hospital at in the coastal town of Boulogne where he was admitted on the next day, August 2.

Two days later again he was embarked onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *St. David* for the short cross-Channel passage back to the United Kingdom. Private Hillier likely returned through Folkestone as it was at the York House Hospital there that he was received, there to spend just under two weeks, from August 5 to 18. After that period he was sent – likely for convalescence – for some seven weeks to the small but picturesque *Barn House* Hospital at Whitstable on the Kentish coast.



(Right above: *The image of Barn House Whitstable is from a private collection (D. Price) which is to be found on the 'Kent in WW1' web-site*.)

(Right: *The photograph of HMHS St. David is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*.)

Private Hillier was released from *Barn House* on or about October 9 of that 1916 to be transferred once more. He was sent to the *West Cliffe* Canadian Eye and Ear Hospital and admitted there on the morrow. On the following day again, October 11, his condition was put before and considered by a Medical Board of the Canadian Casualties Assembly Centre at Folkestone, although whether he was there in person or not is not recorded.

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

To CCAC Folkestone:

The marginally named man has normal vision in each eye. There is no eye strain to explain headaches. This is very probably due to concussion. His condition is due to active service and would recommend him to base duty.

The CCAC Board's decision was issued four days later, on October 15. Private Hillier was to be… *On command at CCD Shoreham for Garrison Duty three months Base Depot…* while it was decided what to do with him.

(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)

But well before those three months had passed at the Canadian Command Depot (CCD) – in fact it was about four weeks, on November 13 – Private Hillier was passed along from Shoreham to the Canadian Ordnance Corps (COC) at Ashford. The work there was likely to have been more demanding as the Ordnance Corps was responsible for such things as the condition of forts and buildings as well as stores and ammunition – and his posting there was to be for a further three months.

On February 27, 1917, Private Hillier was admitted into the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) Hospital at Ashford – a second file has him back in the Military Hospital at *Shorncliffe*. And to further complicate matters, while one document records the problem as a sprained ankle, there is a hand-written medical report in his file which cites the complaint as being bronchitis.

Upon his release from hospital on March 12 he apparently returned to the Canadian Ordnance Corps at Ashford for four weeks, and it was there that on April 2 he was prevailed upon to make his Will; he *did*, leaving his everything to his mother. Then on April 7 Private Hillier was sent to another COC establishment, this one on the East Sussex coast, at Hastings. This move was also to be of some three months duration: fourteen weeks later, on July 18, he was transferred along the coast to Seaford, there to be taken on strength by the 6th Canadian (*Reserve*) Battalion.

Apparently by that time Private Hillier's name had not appeared for two years in any Regimental Conduct Book and he was eligible for a first Good Conduct Badge – this is the chevron worn on the left arm like an upside-down lance corporal's stripe. He was awarded this on August 8 while at Seaford.

(Right: *The community cemetery at Seaford in which are buried a number of Canadian soldiers, including two Newfoundlanders: Frederick Jacob Snelgrove and Ebenezer Tucker* – photograph from 2016)

It was to be some three months later again that he was transferred, on November 15 and on paper, to his former unit, the 2nd Battalion (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*). On this same date he crossed the English Channel on his way back to the Continent; on the next day, the 16th, he reported to one of the by-now four Canadian Infantry Base Depots – likely the 1st as a soldier of the 1st Canadian Division - in the vicinity of the French coastal town of Étaples.

Four days later again Private Hillier was despatched to his unit *in the field* where he reported *to duty* on November 21.

*** * * * ***

The 2nd Battalion was in need of re-enforcements by then; only days previously the unit had been fighting at *Passchendaele*. In fact, since Private Hillier's wounding and his subsequent hospitalization in August of the preceding year, the Battalion had played a role in four major operations.

The first of those had been the *First Battle of the Somme*.

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

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

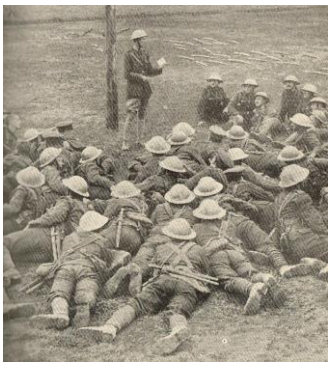
(Right: *Canadian soldiers working in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background* – from *Illustration*)

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that day 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 were to enter the fray at the end of August and beginning of September 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: *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*)



Troops of the 1st Canadian Division had been the first to arrive on *the Somme* and September 1 had been the 2nd Battalion's second day in the trenches. By as early as the 4th it had already incurred twenty-five *killed* and ninety *wounded*. After a period in reserve at La Boiselle* it was to be sent forward again and on September 9 had attacked German positions near Martinpuich: seventy-eight *killed* or *died of wounds* and one-hundred seventy-seven *wounded*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the 2nd Battalion was not to participate in that major general offensive of September 15 with the Canadians at Flers and Courcelette.

La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.

(Right: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle* – photograph from 2011(?))

The unit was to do more tours in the trenches before retiring, on one occasion having reported nineteen *killed* and ninety-nine *wounded*, victims not of any infantry action but solely of the Germans' artillery and their snipers. There was also to be a further attack on October 8.

This confrontation had been deemed as successful by the Battalion War Diarist but on this occasion he appears to have given no account of the casualties involved.

(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the First Battle of the Somme* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

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

On October 15 the unit was then to commence an eleven-day march, at first to the west, then in a semi-circular manner northwards behind the city of Arras and beyond. Its destination was to be Villers au Bois where it had then spent three days in Brigade Reserve before having returned to the trenches – but not to those of *the Somme*.

(Right above: *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*)

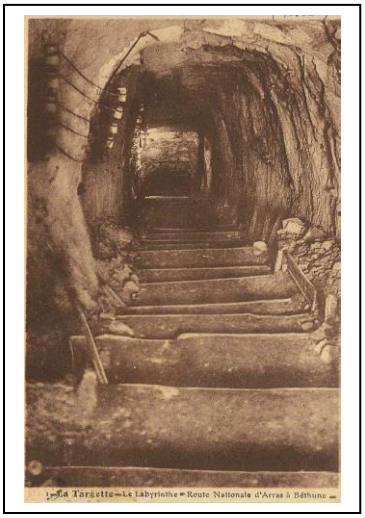
The late autumn of 1916 and then the winter of 1916-1917 was to once more be that every-day drudgery of life in and out of the trenches – but preferable to *the Somme*.

There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. Casualties were to be few and, in fact, it was to be sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, dental problems that had kept the medical facilities busy during that time.

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

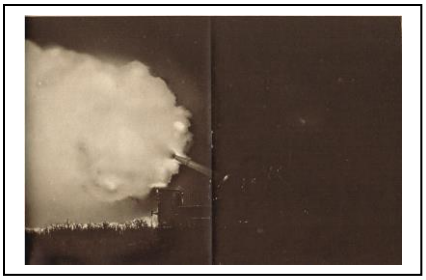
The next major confrontation between the 2nd Battalion and the German Army had then taken place some five months later, in early April, after the *official* conclusion of *First Somme* in mid-November of 1916 and after that winter of 1916-1917 spent by the Canadians in the sectors to the north of Arras and south of Béthune.

During the month of March it surely had been becoming clear to the men of the 2nd Battalion – and to the personnel of *all* Canadian battalions - that there was a major operation in the offing; the forward and rear areas had been hives of ongoing activity for which the unit had supplied working-parties and carrying-parties each day: dumping-areas had been cleared, bivouacs had been sand-bagged, stone had been laid for walks, new trenches had been dug and old ones deepened, troops familiarized with the newly-excavated tunnels and other positions, water-pipes and communication lines buried, artillery and machine-guns sited…



(Right: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth* – from a vintage post-card)

And as the days had passed the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier, on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion describing it as…*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were to be aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had thrown retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been very busy*.



(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge*. – from *Illustration*)

It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had 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 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 had proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be an absolute disaster.

(Preceding page: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood 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 – as seen above, there was even a British Brigade under 2nd Canadian Division Command – had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of 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*)

The role of the 1st Canadian Division on that first day had not been to attack the heights of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but to advance and secure the far right of the slope where it descended southwards towards the city of Arras. The action of the day is related in the entry of that April 9 by the Battalion War Diarist:

At 7.30 a.m. the Battalion advanced in Artillery Formation keeping at a distance of about 500 yards in rear of the preceding Battalion…under cover of our artillery barrage. Enemy's retaliation was light, no difficulty was encountered in maintaining our position.

Battalion H.Q. was established… At night our No. 2 Company moved forward and assisted the 4th Canadian Battalion in digging the Main Resistance Line. Enemy's shelling normal.

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

There had been, on those first two days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous days' successes had proved to be logistically impossible.

By April 11, the Germans had succeeded in damming the breech and the conflict once more had reverted to one of inertia.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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*)

The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was 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.

(Right: *The memorial to the fallen of the 1st Canadian Division at Vimy Ridge stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917.* – photograph from 2017)

By the beginning of June, much of the Canadian Corps had been transferred back to the sectors just to the north of the recent fighting, from Neuville St-Vaast as far north as Béthune.

The 2nd Battalion itself had remained for much of the month of June in the area of Mont St-Éloi*. After the efforts of that campaign, units were to be reinforced, re-organized and were to undergo further training in areas to the rear.

This relative calm was to last until the middle of August.

(Right and right below: *The village of Mont St-Éloi* at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1793 – are visible in both images.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)

Not to be confused with St-Éloi in Belgium where the 2nd Canadian Division had fought in the spring of 1916.

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

The Canadians were to be major contributors to this effort.

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

(continued)

(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during 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.

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

The 2nd Battalion on this occasion had been posted to the nearby area of Les Brébis and… *held themselves in readiness to go forward if necessary to assist in impending operations.*

On the day of the assault, August 15, two of the Battalion's companies had been seconded to the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade and they had proceeded to the area of the once mining-village of Loos, only for that single day. On the following day, the 16th, all four Companies of the 2nd Battalion had been ordered forward to relieve elements of other Canadian battalions in the front line area.

The unit had retired on August 18; casualties during this period had been twenty-four *killed* or *died of wounds* and one-hundred five *wounded*.

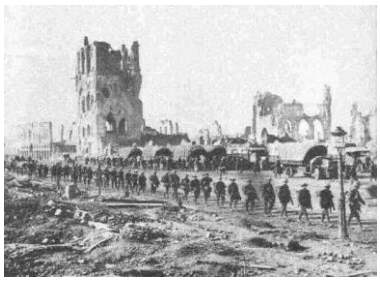
(Right above: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute*. – photograph from 1914)

(Right: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by troops of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions* – from *Le Miroir*)

The Canadian-led operations in the *Lens-Béthune Sector* were still to be incomplete towards the end of August when the British High Command had decided to cancel any further actions there other than defensive ones*. Things were not going altogether as had been planned in that summer campaign further north and the British by this time had been becoming short of men. The Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians were to be called upon to remedy that shortage.

This did not, however, preclude raids – still encouraged and still a favourite of Haig and the British High Command.

The Lens-Béthune campaign thus having been obliged to draw to a close, it was to be only some six weeks hence that the Canadians were to be ordered to join the ongoing battle in Belgium, to the north-east of Ypres. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was later to become better known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that – at least ostensibly – had been one of the British High Command's objectives.



(Right above: *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*)

From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray - after the *Anzacs - it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which had spear-headed the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in reserve.**

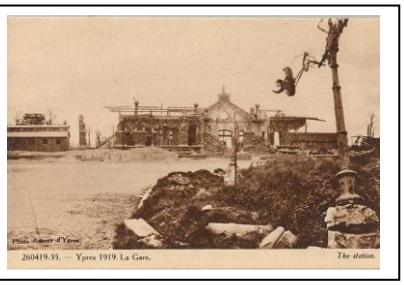
The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps

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

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

On October 19 the 2nd Canadian Infantry Battalion had begun its transfer from the northern French mining area back into the *Kingdom of Belgium* which it had left over a year before in August of 1916. For three days the unit was to march until it halted in the vicinity of Ste-Marie Cappel, just on the French side of the Franco-Belgian frontier. There for the next ten days it was to undergo intensive training.

On November 2 it had boarded a train at nearby Bavinghove at nine o'clock in the morning, to arrive three hours later in the ruins of the railway station, just outside the southern ramparts of the by-now shattered city of Ypres. From there the unit had marched in a north-easterly direction through the ruins of the place to 'C' Camp, in the area of Wieltje.



(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)

On November 3… *Battalion drew Battle Equipment during the day and at night supplied working parties…detailed to carry bath-mats, digging gun-pits, etc. to and in the forward area.*

(continued)

On the following day the Battalion had moved forward again and had relieved the Centre Sector of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade Front Line.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions* – from Le Miroir)

The attack of November 6 was to be the only infantry action in which the 2nd Battalion was engaged during *Passchendaele*.

Promptly at 6.00 a.m. our barrage opened and the attack launched. Very few seconds elapsed before the enemy opened a barrage on our back area and roads leading to the front line… Our 1st Objective was taken by 6.15 a.m. and in a message…timed 7.55 a.m., our 2nd Objective was reported taken. Unconfirmed reports were received at different times that the Final Objective had been taken but this was finally confirmed by Runner at 9.30 a.m. Estimated casualties wired to Brigade – 300. Work on consolidating the position was carried on rapidly… **(Excerpt from the Battalion War Diary for November 6, 1917)**

On the night of November 7-8 the 2nd Battalion was to be relieved and had withdrawn to Wieltje. By November 10 it had been transported back into northern France and stationed in the reserve area. From there it had moved into *Souchez Camp* by November 21 – in fact on that same day - which was the date on which his papers document Private Hillier as having returned *to duty*.

(Right above: *The village of Souchez after which the camp was named had already been reduced to this by the summer of 1915 while the sector was still the responsibility of the French Army* – from *Le Miroir*)

*** * * * ***

Within days of his return to his unit, Private Hillier and his comrades-in-arms were likely thinking of how to vote. Back at home the Canadian Federal Election was taking place and the Armed Forces were to submit their ballots. The last day on which polling was to be conducted was apparently December 17 after which life reverted back to what it had been in every interlude between campaigns.

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers in front of a temporary theatre peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert*. – from *Le Miroir*)

The winter of 1917-1918 passed in much the same manner as had the previous winters of the war on the Western Front. For the Canadian Corps the venue of its responsibility was to be the same as it had been twelve months earlier: the sectors between Arras and Béthune.

But quiet though the winter was, on the first day of that spring, things were to change.

Perhaps not many people – apparently including the Battalion War Diarist - realize how close the Germans came to victory in that March and April of 1918. On March 21 the Germans undertook a raid on the 2nd Battalion positions but were driven off. For the rest of the day the sector was subject to more attention than usual from the enemy guns, but no mention was made in the War Diary of the dramatic events elsewhere – nor would there be, nor any sense of urgency, for another six days.

Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans launched a massive attack, designated as Operation '*Michael*', on March 21. The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there, at the juncture between them and the French forces.

(Right below: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige the High Command to retain troops in the area*. – from *Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens.

The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but had petered out by the end of the month.

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918* – from *Illustration*)

It was on March 27 that the 2nd Battalion received a wire from the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade ordering it to recall men who were at the time working in agriculture. On that day, the next, and the one after, the unit was on the move southwards until, on the 29th, it took over a forward area from the Gordon Highlanders in front of Arras.

On March 31 and April 1, relieved by the 3rd Canadian infantry Battalion, the unit moved into caves in the area of Arras. Already partially existing prior to the *Great War*, these shelters had been enlarged during the earlier years of the conflict for the use of British and Commonwealth troops.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system, almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. It was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions*. – photograph from 2012(?))

A week later, the 2nd Battalion was to be ordered back northwards, to the rear area at Villers au Bois. Further south the German spring offensive was being held and coming to a halt, as so was to be '*Georgette*' in Belgian Flanders.

(Right: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries.* – photograph from 2017)

Thus a relative calm descended on the front as the German threat faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there was nothing of any military significance on either of the two fronts. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to reinforce.

The Allies from this point of view were a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene.

(Right below: *The venerable gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918* – photograph from 2007(?))

An overall Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

But before this time, during the months of May – on the seventh day of which Private Hillier was promoted to the rank of lance corporal - and June, the 2nd Battalion had undergone long periods of training*, before in July being ordered to move to the area of Neuville-Vitasse, just south-west of the city of Arras.

Lance Corporal Hillier had been sent on June 18 to undergo a course at the 1st Divisional Gas School from which he returned on June 23.

On the final day of the month, July 31, Lance Corporal Hillier's unit was on its way to that part of the lines in front of the city of Amiens where the German offensive had been halted in April, almost four months earlier.

(Right: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, was appointed Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the *Wikipedia* web-site)

(continued)

The 2nd Battalion was not to be alone: a large number of other Canadian units – indeed the entire Canadian Corps – was at that time beginning to move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west of Amiens, then south, then east again to finish in front of the city. This movement was to be effected in only a matter of days, much of it on foot, and all of the latter stages during the hours of darkness.

It had been intended to surprise the enemy – and thus it was to prove.

On August 6 the Battalion encamped in the Bois de Boves and later on the same day, the unit moved into the Bois de Gentelles. It there remained until the night of August 7-8 when it moved into its jumping-off positions: the Allied attack - well supported by tanks - was to commence on the morrow morn.

(Right: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'* – from *Illustration*)

The next morning, August 8, was foggy when the barrage descended upon the German defenders. Lance Corporal Hillier's 2nd Battalion pressed its attack during the day and by nine o'clock that evening it had taken its objective, the village of Ignaucourt. On that day the enemy – particularly his machine-gunners – had fought hard at times but the pursuit, albeit sometimes slowed, had never stopped.

(Right: *A German machine-gunner who also gave his all* – from *Illustration*)

(Right: *A group of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: A tank may be seen in the background.* – from *Le Miroir*)

2nd Battalion War Diary entry for August 9, 1918: *Transport and nucleus reached IGNAUCOURT between 2.00 and 3.30 A.M. and occupied various billets and standing vacated by the enemy.*

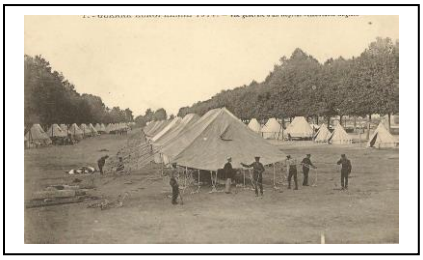
Orders were received at 4.00 A.M. for the Battalion to take up fresh assembly positions. For these, the Battalion moved off at 8 a.m. and later in the day, leap-frogged and attacked BEAUFORT and ROUVROY-en-Santerre. The two villages were taken after stiff fighting. In the evening the Battalion was relieved by the 3rd Can. Bn., and on completion of relief, moved back to BEAUFORT and vicinity.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The sacrifice of Lance Corporal Hillier is honoured on the New Harbour, Trinity Bay War Memorial*. – photograph from 2014)

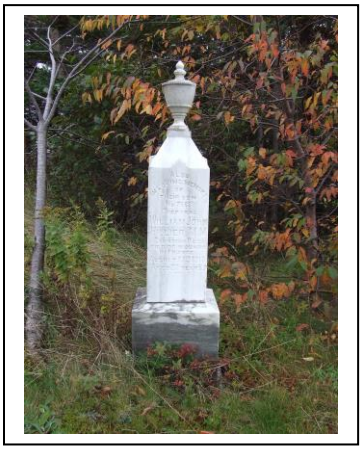
Lance Corporal Hillier was reported as having been wounded on that August 9. Evacuated from the forward area – presumably after preliminary treatment - he was admitted on an unrecorded date into the 5th Casualty Clearing Station at Vecquemont.

There he was afforded medical attention to gun-shot wounds to the jaw and to a forearm.



(Right: *A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War*: *Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature*. - from a vintage post-card)

The son of Robert Hillier, fisherman, - to whom he had sent a special payment of sixty dollars on December 6 of 1916 - and of Catherine Hillier (née *Gosse*) – to whom as of October 1 of 1917 he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay – he was also elder brother to Robert and to Clara.



Lance Corporal Hillier was reported to have *died of wounds* on August 13 of 1918 by the Commanding Officer of the 5th Casualty Clearing Station.

William John Hillier had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-four years and two months: date of birth in New Harbour, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, June 25, 1890.

(Right: *A family memorial which stands in the Anglican Cemetery in New Harbour, commemorates the life of Corporal* William John Hillier, MM.* – photograph from 2014)

Lance Corporal William John Hillier was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

****There appears to be no evidence of a second stripe having been awarded.***

(continued)

His Majesty, the KING, has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Military Medal for bravery in the Field to the under-mentioned Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men:-

Pte. (L-/C.) Hillier, W.J., 2nd Bn., E. Ontario R.

London Gazette (31173) of February 11, 1919; Page 2133

The Military Medal was awarded to Lance Corporal Hillier on October 2, 1918. There appears to be no documentation of the date or of any circumstances pertaining to the incident in which he earned it.

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 25, 2023.