

Private John Rupert Weigall Hollands (Number 24604) of the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Infantry, having no known last resting-place, is honoured on the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today Ieper).

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a clerk, John Rupert Weigall Hollands appears to have left behind no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Québec except that he is recorded as being present in the newly-constructed military complex of Valcartier on August 12-13 of 1914.

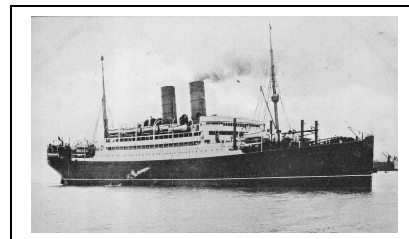
His first pay records show this date – in fact, two sources differ – as being that on which he was remunerated for services to the Canadian Military, the unit into which he was first enlisted having been the Pictou Highlanders of the Canadian Militia*.

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****The Canadian Militia was formed primarily for the defence of the nation, therefore its personnel was not to serve overseas. At this time, those recruited by these units were quickly transferred to the new battalions being formed expressly for service outside Canadian borders.***

Having undergone a medical examination on August 29, Private Hollands was transferred to the 13th Battalion of Canadian Infantry (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) on September 23. Only two days later again, on September 25, Private Hollands' unit was embarking – or had already embarked – onto His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* – in the port at Québec for passage overseas to the United Kingdom.

The 13th Battalion was not the only unit to be boarding *Alaunia*; there was also a detachment of the 14th Battalion of Canadian Infantry; the Headquarters of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade of which the 13th Battalion was a component; and a part of the Divisional (later to become the Canadian 1st Divisional) Train.

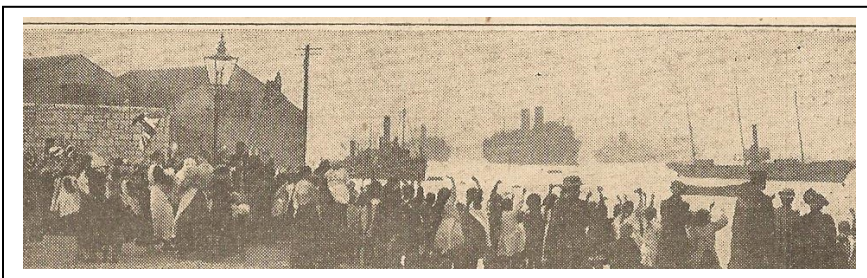


(Right above: *The photograph of Alaunia – to be sunk after hitting a mine on October 19, 1916 - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Alaunia is documented as having sailed from Quebec on the same September 25, but only to drop anchor just *upstream*, at Wolfe's Cove, there to wait for five days before the ship finally slid downstream. The vessel then again stopped, on this second occasion at the Gaspé on October 2; there the convoy formed for the trans-Atlantic crossing and finally sailed from Canadian waters on the following afternoon, Saturday October 3. On October 5, as the formation passed along the south coast of Newfoundland, the small Bowring Brothers' steamer Florizel, sailed to meet and join it, carrying the *First Five-Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment.

The convoy reached its destination, the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport, on October 14. However, such was the poor organization that some troops were to remain on board their ships for several days before disembarking. The 13th Battalion, however, was not such a one, as it set foot on land on October 15. Thereupon it boarded trains late that evening and was transported to Patney Station, Salisbury Plain, arriving there at three in the morning.

Unfortunately for the Canadian new-comers, their camp on West Down South was to be found some sixteen kilometres distant from the railway station – and it was also to be found on foot. To their credit, the march was made in less than three-and-a-half hours.



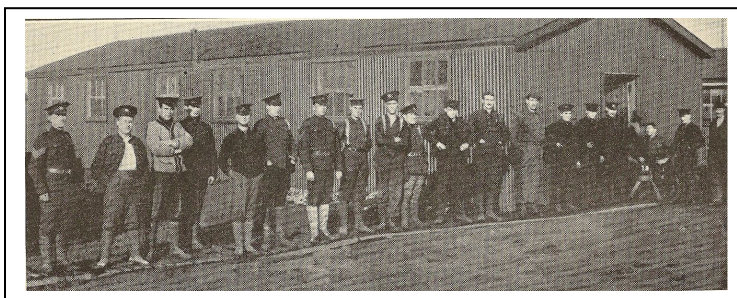
(Right above: *The convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914 – from The War Illustrated*)

The records show that during the months of September and October – and the pay records confirm – Private Hollands had been elevated to the rank of lance corporal. By the first day of November, however, he had been reduced to the ranks. No reason appears to have been recorded, neither is a precise date of either promotion or demotion to be found among the papers in his dossier.

Army regulations 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*. 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**.

**In fact, a large percentage of those joining the Colours at this early stage of the Great War had recently emigrated from the British Isles.*

On February 4 the Canadian Division marched to a review area where it was inspected by His Majesty, King George V and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener*. The next few days were spent in final preparation for departure and at seven-thirty in the evening of February 10, the 13th Battalion boarded a train to take it to the English west-coast port of Avonmouth.

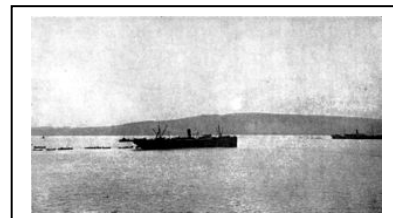


**For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener was named in 1916 – it had been called Berlin until then.*

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

At Avonmouth, Port of Bristol, the 13th Battalion boarded HMT *Novian*, the ship then sailing as part of the Canadian Division Armada at dawn on the morning of February 12. It was apparently a very rough and unpleasant voyage, the ship's captain taking the decision to head out to sea and into the wind to avoid serious injury to the horses: it also prolonged the agony for the wretchedly-ill troops.

Three days later, on February 15, the vessel dropped anchor in the French port of St-Nazaire on the coast of Brittany, its passengers looking forward to standing once again on *terra firma*. Many were still feeling the ill-effects of the voyage and were apparently less than happy to then be kept on board ship for that night before being transferred to trains early on the morning of the 16th.



They were then even less overjoyed to learn that it was they who first had to unload the ship, the dockers having gone on strike.

But the horses were apparently no worse for wear.

(Previous page: *The accompanying caption records this photograph of Novian as having been taken during the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. – from the Wikipedia web-site*)

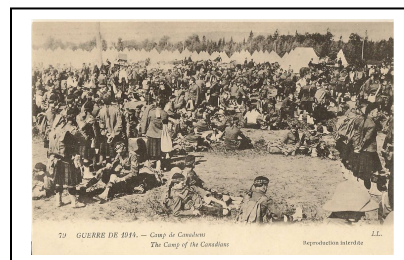
(Right above: *The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site*)



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(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*)

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.



In March and April the Division, moving north into the Kingdom of Belgium, eventually took up positions in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the Great War. However, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the Western Front, the area was to be relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13th Battalion would begin to fit into the rigours and the 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 to the forward area, the latter the 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 above: *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*)

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From the railway station in the port of St-Nazaire the 13th Battalion was to move north to the town of Hazebrouck. It had then taken more than two days and two nights to travel six-hundred eighty kilometres – travelled in those well-documented and uncomfortable wagons of the period labelled ‘40 HOMMES-8 CHEVAUX’ – to do so, a journey which was then completed by a thirteen-kilometre march, each man carrying his thirty-six kilos (eighty pounds) of kit, to billets.



(Right above: *The northern French town of Hazebrouck, likely at a period between the two World Wars – from a vintage post card*)

There the unit... *got off stiff and sore after our long and cramped journey, fell in and marched eight miles, through pouring rain, to FLETRE.*

Four days later again, on February 23, the 13th Battalion was once more on the march: *Paraded at 8 a.m. and marched to ARMENTIERES, 17 miles, very hard on the feet, roads paved with cobble-stones nearly all the way. Arrived at ARMENTIERES at 2.30 p.m. and were billeted in the Workhouse.* (Excerpts from the 13th Battalion War Diary)



(Right above: *Troops – in this case likely British – on the move either in or towards Belgium in the early days of the Great War. Canadian units – apart from distinguishing badges and flashes – wore the same uniforms and, except for their rifles and machine-guns (which were later to be replaced) – had much the same equipment. – from a vintage post-card*)

On the next day again the troops began to undergo their first experiences of the trenches under the supervision of British troops already there.

On March 2 the 13th Battalion was ordered to march to the area of Sailly (likely *Sailly-sur-la-Lys*). There it was to experience the everyday drudgery of the front lines, the support area and the reserve sectors for the following twenty-four days. Judging from the sparse 13th Battalion War Diary entries for that time, there was very little to report.

On April 7 the Battalion began the transfer which was to see it posted to the *Ypres Salient*. On the 15th of the month it crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier and, after travelling by bus on the morrow, found itself near the villages of St-Jean and St-Julien to the north-east of the already shattered medieval city of Ypres.

During the first five days of the 13th Battalion's posting to *the Salient* all was quiet, the Battalion War Diarist even remarking that the... *Weather all that could be desired.* 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.



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(Preceding page: *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. 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.

(Right: *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 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, particularly that of the 13th Battalion which was obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, by the entire unit became necessary.



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

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

The 13th Battalion was relieved on April 25 and was withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, it remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it withdrew into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres.

By that date, however, Private Hollands had already made the supreme sacrifice.



(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then 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*)

The son of the Reverend Charles William Hollands, Church of England clergyman, deceased May 18, 1918, and of Emily Hannah Hollands (née *Burles*) – to whom as of October, 1914, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - at the time of their son's enlistment of Carbonear, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Winnifred-Dorothea, Edgar-Wilfred-Blanchard, to Faith-Amy-Margaret, Emily-Agnes, Francis-William-Thomas, to George-Edward –Curzon, and to Henry-Martyn.

Killed in action by a shell exploding in a dug-out of which he was an occupant. It was impossible for us to bury him owing to the heavy operation at that time. – Letter from OC 13th Bn 23/4/15

Private Hollands was initially recorded as having been *killed in action* on April 24, the date later amended to April 23.

John Rupert Weigall Hollands had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and two months: date of birth at Bonne Bay, Newfoundland, June 7, 1892.

Private John Rupert Weigall Hollands 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).



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 27, 2023.