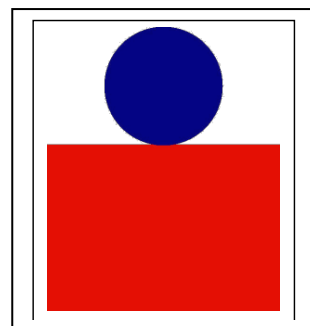




Corporal Thomas Hughes (Number 24136) of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is honoured in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference, 24-26-28-30.

(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.)



Thomas Hughes has left behind him very little in the way of a recorded family history. His attestation paper documents him as born in Springhill, Cumberland County, Nova Scotia, in 1885, of parents who had only recently departed from Little Bay, Newfoundland with a son, John A., born there in 1882. His father had been born in St. John's Newfoundland in 1850 but there appears to be little trace of his mother. His father had moved to Bell Island (*Wabana*) by the time of his son's enlistment and was still living there – a widower – with son John at the time of the 1921 Census.

(continued)

Thomas Hughes' first pay records show that either August 13 or 14 of 1914, only days after the Declaration of War, was the day on which the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services. They also show that it was at this time that he was taken on strength by the 5th Regiment of the Royal Highlanders of Canada in which he had already been serving for some five years.

The 5th Regiment was a Canadian Militia unit whose reason for being was solely the defence of Canada; it was therefore by law forbidden to undertake any military activities outside the borders of the country. However, Overseas Battalions were by this time being mobilized and the 5th Regiment was to recruit on behalf of three of them: the 42nd Battalion; the 73rd Battalion; and the one by which Private Hughes was *taken on strength* on September 22 of 1914*, the 13th.

**A further source records this attachment taking place on October 4, while the 13th Battalion was on board ship.*

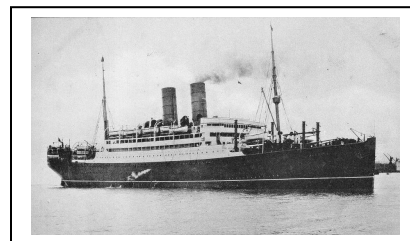
There appear in the records several dates on which Private Hughes received a promotion directly to the rank of corporal. According to the pay records it may have been as early as September 22, the day on which he was *taken on strength* by the 13th Battalion. To be precise, his new rank was that of Armourer Corporal, his main duty being as much the welfare of the weapons as that of those under his command.

It was three days after this transfer, on the 25th, that Corporal Hughes underwent a medical examination – perhaps not his first – and also his attestation. The proceedings took place at the large, only recently-established military complex at Valcartier, Québec, culminating in the declaration – on paper – made by a senior officer that... *having been finally 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*)



On the same September 25 Corporal Hughes' unit, one of the four battalions comprising the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian Division*, was transported by train to the port area of Quebec City. There it boarded the His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia*, a requisitioned vessel of the Cunard Line.



**Later to be logically designated as the 1st Canadian Division once the 2nd Canadian Division had been formed.*

(continued)

(Preceding page: *The photograph of Alaunia – there was later a second, the one pictured to have been sunk after hitting a mine on October 19, 1916 - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Corporal Hughes' 13th Battalion was not to travel alone on board *Alaunia*. Also taking passage for the United Kingdom was a part of the 14th Battalion of Canadian Infantry; the entire staff personnel of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade; and also, reportedly not embarking until September 29, a part of the Divisional Train.

Having embarked its military passengers, the vessel then steamed some several hundred metres only to anchor just *upstream*, in Wolfe's Cove, where she remained for the next number of days.

On either that September 29 or on the day following, *Alaunia* moved into the main channel of the Saint Lawrence and sailed downstream past Quebec City and, during the next days, on to the area of the Gaspé. There the convoy was being assembled which was to transport the first Canadian Contingent overseas. It sailed on October 3 of that 1914. 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 was not one of these; it disembarked on the morrow, October 15, whereupon it was transported by train to Salisbury Camp.

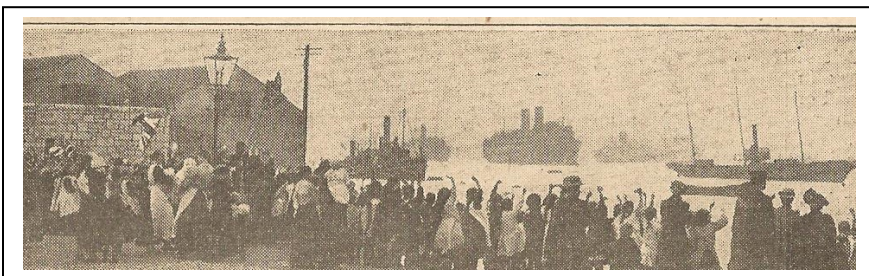


(Right above: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it is almost a century after the Great War – and a lot less busy nowadays - photograph from 2013*)

**It was not really their fault: a submarine scare had deterred the ships from continuing on to the larger port of Southampton where the Canadians were originally to disembark.*

The trains pulled out of Plymouth late that same evening and were not to reach their destination until three o'clock in the morning of the 16th.

The Battalion War Diarist begins his entry for that October 16 by noting that after the train journey, the Battalion had still to march ten miles to West Down South Camp and that... *the day was spent in settling down to quarters.*

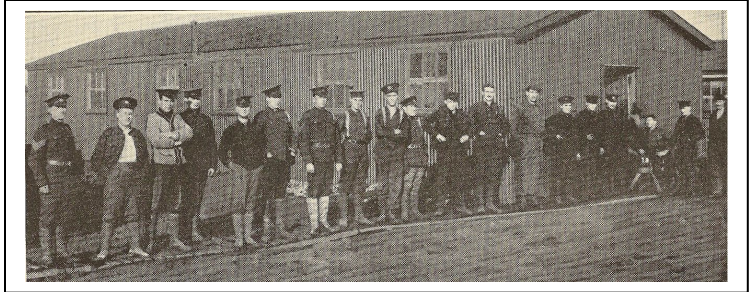


(Right above: *Some of the ships of the convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914 – from The War Illustrated*)

The 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*.

On February 4 the 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 on or about February 10, the 13th Battalion of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade of the Canadian Division boarded a train to transport it to the west-coast port of Avonmouth. From there it was to take ship for the Continent, to disembark in the French port of St-Nazaire.



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

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

The events of the period of February 1 until 16 have not been entered into the 13th Battalion War Diary and none of the journals of the other battalions of the 3rd Brigade make mention of the 13th Battalion. Nonetheless, the crossing was a tempestuous one and it had been only on or about the afternoon of February 15 that some of the ships carrying the Canadian Division – and the one transporting the 13th Battalion - steamed into the harbour at St-Nazaire. There many of the men – still feeling the effects of the voyage - had apparently been kept on board ship for that night before being ordered onto trains at half-past eight in the evening of the 16th.

According to the 13th Battalion War Diary, it took three days for the train(s) carrying Corporal Hughes' unit to make the journey of six-hundred ninety-four kilometres from St-Nazaire to the northern French town of Hazebrouck.



(Right: *An image of the town of Hazebrouck, from the period just after the Great War – 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.*

(Right: *Troops – likely British – on the march towards the forward area in the north of France during the early period of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



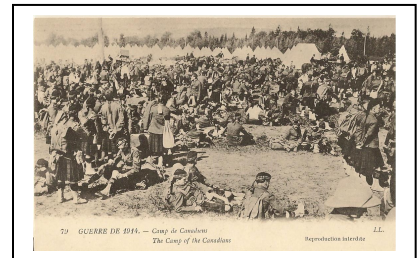
For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. Thus, four days after having arrived at Hazebrouck, on February 23, the 13th Battalion was once more on the march: *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.*

(Right: *The personnel of the 13th Battalion wore a kilt, the tartan – a version of that of the Black Watch - shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site)*



(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)*

Armentières is a town on the French side of the Franco-Belgian frontier and, at that stage of the *Great War*, very close to the forward area, and those front lines were where the 1st and 2nd Companies of the 13th Battalion found themselves on only the day after its arrival there, to be relieved by the 3rd and 4th Companies on the next again, the 25th.



No casualties were incurred on this occasion, but by then the rank and file of the Battalion had been introduced to at least *some* of the routines and rigours – as well as the perils - of life in the trenches*. Their first instructors had been the personnel of a British regiment, *The Buffs*, who by that time were, if not yet veterans, already-seasoned troops.

**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)*

(continued)

There, in the Fleurbaix Sector, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the situation was relatively quiet. In fact, it was quiet enough to instil a false impression of what war was about – the War Diary reports no casualties – and the weather occupies much of the Diarist's daily reports.

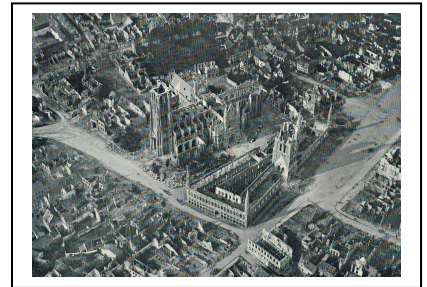
At the end of the first week in April, the Battalion, moving by a circuitous route – to the west, then north, then east – was transferred with the other units of the Canadian Division into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, to eventually take over positions from French Colonial troops in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*.

Having at first marched, as of the Franco-Belgian frontier, Corporal Hughes' unit boarded busses which on April 16 brought it to the vicinity of Ypres. From there the 13th Battalion marched once more: to the north-east of the city and to the villages of Sin Juliaan (Saint Julien) and Sin Jaan (Saint Jean) where it was billeted.



(Right: *British troops in Belgium board busses requisitioned from the area of London – others appear to prefer to walk – from Illustration*)

(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*)



13th Battalion War Diary entry for April 21, 1915: *Battalion paraded for the trenches at 5.30 p.m. Arrived without a casualty. Trenches in poor shape. Many unburied dead between the lines. Weather all that could be desired.*

But whereas the first weeks of the Canadian presence on the Continent had been relatively quiet, the dam was about to burst - although it was to be gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it.

The next day was April 22, 1915.

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.



(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 that 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. On May 3 the unit was ordered to move into northern France, to the area of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.



(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*)

But by that time, Corporal Hughes' war was over.

It had been on the very first day of the German onslaught, April 22, that Corporal Hughes had been reported as...*wounded and missing*. He eventually been taken to an advanced dressing station, a medical facility almost on the battlefield itself whose personnel thus faced the same dangers as did those that they treated.

The son of Henry Hughes, engineer and a former foreman in the mines, latterly those on Bell Island, he was also younger brother to John A., wholesale and retail merchant on Bell Island. Corporal Hughes was reported as having died of wounds on April 24, 1915, in the same unidentified dressing station.

Thomas Hughes had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-eight years: date of birth at Springhill, Nova Scotia, February 17, 1885.

Corporal Thomas Hughes 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 25, 2023.