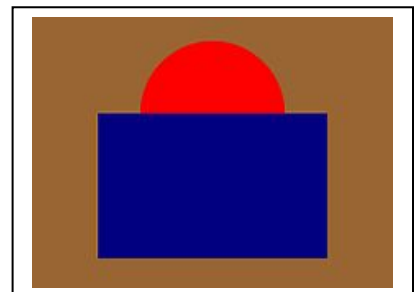




Private William John Hutchings (Number 66232) of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord: Grave reference II.D.223..

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Victoria Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *shipper*, William John Hutchings was to emigrate from the Dominion of Newfoundland at an early age as the 1901 Census records not only that his parents and four of their five children were resident in Montréal by that time, but that they had arrived in Canada in the year 1896.

By that 1901 he was documented as being an apprentice – no further details, alas – and three years later again, the exact date June 16, 1904, he took for his bride Mlle. Clodia\* Genereux, in the Congregational Church in Montréal. The couple appear to have had three children, the first baptized into the Church of England, and the later two into the Roman Catholic persuasion. At the time of William John's enlistment, the family residence was recorded as 238, Guy Street, Montréal.

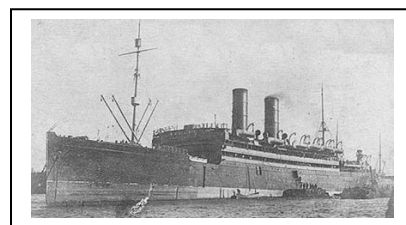
*\*There have been various attempts at her name in the relevant papers: Claudia, Clothilde, Clothilda and her husband's 'Clody'. Clodia is from their marriage records.*

It was on May Day (May 1) of 1915 that he presented himself for enlistment at the *Peel Street Barracks* in the city. There he underwent a medical examination which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. He was also attested at that same time and perhaps – as there is no other date on the document – his enlistment was there and then formally accepted when the Commanding Officer of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) – by which unit he was thereupon *taken on strength* – Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Gunn\*, declared – on paper – that...*having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

*\*He was named to that post on May 11, ten days later.*

Only days later, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion - with Private Hutchings now a soldier of the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, "A" Company - boarded a train for the journey to the east-coast port of Halifax. The Battalion War Diary records that the unit embarked at ten o'clock in the evening of May 10, 1915, and that the vessel sailed on the morrow at day-break.

The vessel on which Private Hutchings sailed was His Majesty's Transport *Cameronia*\*, apparently requisitioned just one month previously – although some sources dispute this. On this occasion, also taking passage to the United Kingdom on her were the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Headquarters Staff, the Advance Squadron Remount Depot, and a detachment of the Royal Army Medical Corps.



*\*Twenty-three months later, while she was carrying some two-thousand five-hundred military personnel, Cameronia was torpedoed, on April 15, 1917, and sunk with the loss of two-hundred ten lives.*

(Right above: *The image of Cameronia is from the 'At Sea: SS Cameronia – Percy's War' web-site.*)

(continued)



After a reportedly uneventful voyage, *Cameronia* put into the harbour of the south-coast British naval facilities at Plymouth-Devonport on May 20. The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion thereupon boarded a train for Westenhanger in the county of Kent.

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



From the railway station there, where Private Hutching's unit arrived at mid-night, it was to be a further one-hour march to the Battalion's new quarters at *East Sandling Camp*. This was to be its base for the next four months.

*East Sandling* was a subsidiary of the fledgling Canadian *Shorncliffe* military complex on the Dover Straits and in the immediate vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone. It was at *Shorncliffe* that the newly-arriving battalions and other units from Canada – those destined to be a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division - were now to congregate and to train before their despatch to France in that mid-September, four months hence.

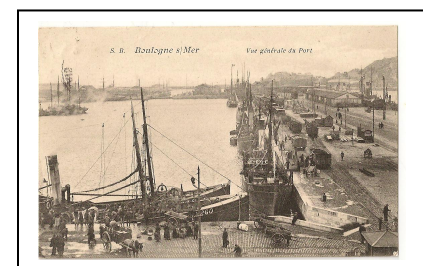


(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

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



And so it was with Private Hutchings and his 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the unit now a component of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, *it* an element of the newly-formed 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. Their crossing to France on September 15 appears to have been straight-forward enough: *Battalion moved off at 6.0 pm. Very trying march to Folkestone pier via Napier Barracks arriving there at 9.0 pm. Steamer left at 9.35 pm. arrived Boulogne at 11.15 pm. Unit then marched to Osterhove Rest Camp arriving there at 1.15 am.* (Excerpt from 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of September 15, 1915)

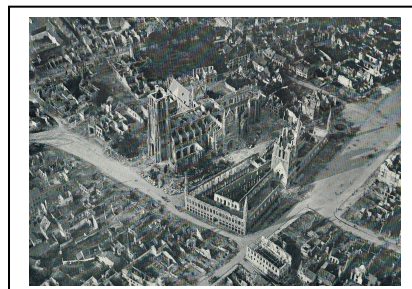


As of this time, Private Hutchings was on *active service*.

(Right above: *An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(continued)

Having now disembarked on the Continent, the entirety of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to move northward into the *Kingdom of Belgium*. There it was to serve with the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade to the south of the *Ypres Salient* in a sector between the already battered city of Ypres and the Franco-Belgian border.



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

It was at ten past mid-night on September 17 that the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion boarded another train, one which would apparently crawl the fifty or so kilometres eastward to the large centre of St-Omer which was reached at seven o'clock that morning. From there it took the rest of the day to march onwards to Hazebrouck where it was that the unit was to be billeted.



*(Above right: The venerable railway station at St-Omer through which passed the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, likely a much busier place during the time of the Great War: Today it has lost much of its former opulence. – photograph from 2015)*

That march had been no fun: not only had many of the men been issued with new boots, but the French roads were often paved with cobble-stones. Thus the Battalion medical officer – also acting as War Diarist – reported a goodly number of feet to be patched up en route and upon arrival.

*(Right below: While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. This is surely early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card)*

Three days later Private Hutchings and his comrades-in-arms were on the move again. Having bivouacked for the night of September 21-22 in close proximity to the border town of Bailleul, on the following morning the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier and proceeded to the area of Locre (today *Loker*) where it was to serve for the next number of months.



On September 28...*Battalion moved out to occupy trenches in vicinity of Kemmel. Took over trenches from 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion Canadians at 11.0 pm...*

There had been no casualties on that first day, but on the next...*First casualty. Private McBride of Sanitary Squad wounded in left arm...and later that day the first fatality: Corporal B.M. Patterson shot, likely by a sniper...whilst firing at enemy over parapet. Since deceased.*

(continued)



Thus the newcomers rapidly came to be familiar with the routines, the rigours and also the perils of life in the trenches of the *Great War*\*.

*\*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, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*



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

*(Right 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)*

Thus the end of the autumn of 1915 and the winter of the 1915-1916 were to pass, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division stationed in the *Ploegsteert Sector* in Belgium just north of the frontier, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division in a sector just to the north of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. In the meantime the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had officially come into being on mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of the New Year, 1916, to be stationed in proximity to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division until the last of its infantry battalions were to arrive during the month of March.

*(Right: Troops – in this instance British, the King's Regiment (Liverpool) – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Sector. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration)*



Overall, during this period life was quiet. In the case of Private Hutchings, however, the months of December and January had likely been a little less so: He had been brought to the attention of the Battalion authorities, charged with having been...*drunk in billets*...the offence aggravated, of course, by his having been on *active service* at the time. He was awarded twenty-eight days of Field Punishment Number 1\*.

*\*Being placed in fetters or hand-cuffs or the like and being attached to a fixed object such as a post or wagon-wheel for up to two hours per day.*

The first part of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Victoria Rifles) War Diary entry for March 20, 1916, reads as follows: *From 6.00 P.M. 6.30 P.M. Enemy shelled our support and communication trenches with 4.1s wounding seven men.*

One of those struck by shrapnel was Private Hutchings who had incurred a fractured arm (tibia) and, more seriously, injuries to his abdomen. From the field he was immediately evacuated to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance at Westoutre. He was one of three wounded to be admitted there on that day, two of whom were to be forwarded to a Casualty Clearing Station.

In the case of Private Hutchings it was to be the 2<sup>nd</sup> CCS at Bailleul which received him.

The son of John Hutchings and of Lucinda (*Lucy*) Hutchings (née *Laird*)\*, he was also brother to Annie-Laird, to George, to Mary and to Alexander-Brown.

*\*While their offspring were all born in St. John's, Newfoundland, the couple was married on August 16, 1876, on Prince Edward Island.*

As seen above, William John Hutchings married Clodia Genereux with whom he had three children: Eva Clothilda - born 1906; Joseph Edouard William – born 1908; and Joseph George William – born 1913. On the day of his enlistment he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars to her from his pay, and had also willed to her his all (no date available).

His wife passed away towards the end of or soon after the conflict as it was the elder son who received his father's medals, and it is documented that by July 21, 1920, their *orphan children* were receiving a pension.

William John Hutchings had enlisted at the *apparent age* of thirty-three years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, May 14, 1882 (from attestation papers and Congregational Parish Records).

Private William John Hutchings 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) (right).



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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 25, 2023.



