

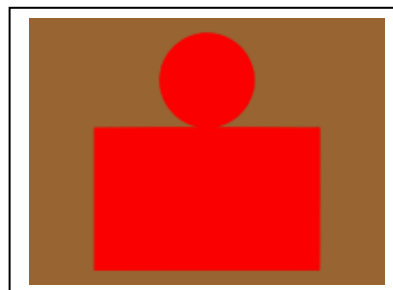


Private Lancelot (Lance) Keeping (Number 33850) of the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery: Grave reference III.K.10.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry) is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

***Despite this designation, the unit was authorized in 1914 as a battalion of Canadian Infantry.**

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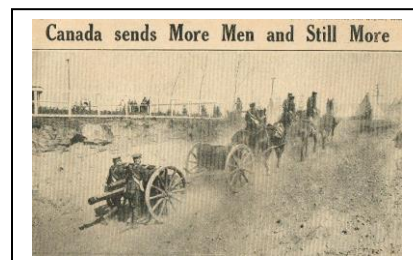


His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a cutter-clothier in a factory, Lance Keeping appears to have left little trace of his departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland to Canada. All that seems to be confirmed is his presence at Valcartier, Québec, in September of 1914.

According to his documents, Lance Keeping both enlisted and attested at Valcartier on September 23. On that same day, a Major Ford* concluded the formalities when he 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.*

**Was he to become Lieutenant Colonel Ford, Commanding Officer of the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station?*

(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*)



Two days later again, on September 25, Private Keeping presented himself for medical examination. At half-past four on that same afternoon he boarded a train and ninety minutes later was in the Port of Québec; one hour later again he was embarking onto His Majesty's Transport *Megantic* for the trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.

Private Keeping had apparently enlisted into the CAMC (*Canadian Army Medical Corps*) and been attached to the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station. This was the unit with which he boarded *Megantic* on that September evening, not that it was to travel alone: also having taken ship were the 15th Battalion of Canadian Infantry; part of the Canadian Divisional Ammunition Column; and the personnel of the 1st Canada Field Ambulance.

Megantic was not, however, to sail very far for the next few days; in fact, she was to steam only a short distance, and that *upstream*, until she dropped anchor off Wolfe's Cove. There the ship was to ride until September 30, then to pass in front of the city of Québec on her way to the rendezvous off the Gaspé with the other ships of the convoy which was to carry the Canadian Division to overseas service.



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

From the Gaspé the thirty-one transports and their naval escorts 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. She was carrying the *First Five-Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment to war.

(continued)

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 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station disembarked on October 16, at half-past six in the evening – apparently the last unit to land from *Megantic* - and marched to a railway station in Plymouth.

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



Apparently by that time, thirty of the personnel were suffering from food poisoning; nor was the unit to board its train until seven-thirty that evening - thus it was to be a difficult overnight journey to Patney Station in the vicinity of West Down North Camp: arrival time, three o'clock in the morning. That left only a further four-and-a-half hours on foot for most of the weary travellers. The 1st CCCS War Diarist has made note of no further activities or events on that October 17 – understandably so.

The British Army regulations of the day were such that troops were to undergo some fourteen weeks of training after the time of enlistment; at that point they were to be considered as fit for *active service*. Thus the newly-arrived Canadians of the infantry battalions 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*.

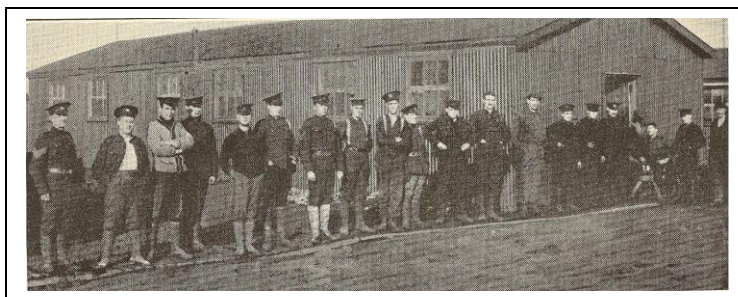
Those of the 1st CCCS, however, indulged in little training – which is not to say that Private Keeping's unit was not busy: for the next number of days, supplies and equipment were constantly arriving by the waggon-load and the horses – some of which for whatever the reason had been *misplaced* en route – required all of the things that horses require.

And on October 18 came the order which required the establishment of a clearing hospital.

The following months were to be just as hectic. There were to be visits from politicians and generals – and one even from the King and Queen, with the requisite preparations for such an occasion. More supplies and more horses arrived...as did the rains followed by snow, by which time the drill which had been absent during those first days and weeks had found its way into the busy schedule.

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*.

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



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

By that moment, however, the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station had already left the country from Southampton – at nine o'clock in the evening of February 2 – and had arrived in the French port-city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine, at six in the morning of the following day.



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

Not so, Private Keeping - Just as the Canadian Division was departing from England on active service to the Continent, he was being admitted into the 1st Canadian General Hospital facilities for venereal patients established by that time in or in the vicinity of the Wiltshire village of Bulford. He there began to receive treatment for a problem that was to affect him for the remainder of that year*.

**Private Keeping's history at this point differs according to a second set of records: He was serving with the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station in January when he was diagnosed as with venereal disease. Following the policy of the British – and therefore Canadian – Army, he was obliged to pay a sum from his pay contributing towards his treatment, in Private Keeping's case, a daily fifteen cents. This was deducted from January 23 to 31, 1915, inclusive, at which time it ceased.*

And, according to this second version of events, it was on January 31 that he was transferred to the Canadian Army Medical Corps Training Depot at Shorncliffe. The file concludes at this point.

Because the 1st Canadian General Hospital was responsible for the camp hospital at the West Down North Camp, it was still treating patients at the time of the Canadian Division's departure for the Continent. The Hospital therefore remained behind in England and it was not until May 13 of that year that it was to make the cross-Channel voyage.

The facility gradually reduced the number of its patients – not all were in a single building, nor even in a single community – until the last of them, those suffering from venereal complaints, were transferred from Bulford to Shorncliffe, on the English-Channel coast in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone. In fact, the entire Canadian operation was being transferred to the same newly-established military complex.

Five battalions had remained behind at Salisbury Plain in February and were now ordered to Shorncliffe to become the nucleus for the Canadian Training Depot, and for the Canadian Training Division whose home this was now to be.

(Right: *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*)



Private Keeping himself was discharged from hospital on March 3 at which time he was despatched to the Canadian Base Depot by that time also at Shornecliffe where he was attached to Base Details. On the last day of that same month he was again transferred, on this occasion to the Canadian Army Medical Corps at the nearby Training Depot.

Among the many entries in Private Keeping's records are those pertaining to a goodly number of misdemeanours; they are accompanied by the penalties awarded to him by the authorities. The charge dealt with on April 19 at the Shornecliffe Depot is one that is not recorded; however, it was sufficient to merit twenty-eight days' detention.

He was not to complete that time before he was again in need of further medical attention for the same problem. Thus on April 27, Private Keeping was admitted into hospital at Shornecliffe itself, care at that time being provide by the Canadian 4th Stationary Hospital. He remained there until May 1 when he was sent north to Newcastle-on-Tyne, to the Workhouse Military Hospital whose specialty his complaint was.

He remained in hospital at Newcastle for more than two weeks before being released from there, on May 17, to be forwarded to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at Monks Horton. It would seem that it was there that he served what was left of his detention as the Officer Commanding the Hospital records... released from detention 24-7-15*.

**It was also where he penned a first will on June 21 in which he writes... I give the whole of my property and effects to my invalid sister Miss Gertrude Keeping...*

Was he to spend the following seven weeks or so at Monks' Horton? That is where a *drunk on duty* charge places him on September 4, an offence which earned him a further twenty-eight days' detention.

Almost immediately, on September 12, Private Keeping's medical woes were again to intervene: for a second time he was admitted into the tented hospital at Shornecliffe, to be discharged from there on October 4. Only two days afterwards, the Officer Commanding the Convalescent Hospital at not-so-distant Monks Horton was reporting his return there, on this occasion perhaps as a Canadian Army Medical Corps trainee.

If so – or even if not - his tenure there lasted under a month: he had returned to Shornecliffe by November 4 on which day he was forfeiting a further five days' pay. This was followed by a similar penalty two days afterwards, an incident which at least allows us to know that he was back at the CAMC Training School by that time.

On December 19 there was a further transfer ordered for Private Keeping: to the 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearance Station which was preparing itself for departure to the Continent.

(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: the Canadian 2nd Division left for the Continent from there in September of 1915. – photograph from 2009)



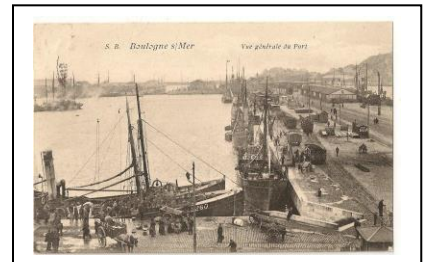
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On February 4, 1916, the 3rd CCCS withdrew its services at Shorncliffe and was replaced by the Canadian 7th Stationary Hospital. On that same date, Private Keeping was transferred once more, from the former unit to the latter. Possibly the main factor in his retention in England was that he was by then serving a fifty-six days' detention, this sentence in lieu of the preceding one of twenty-two days' forfeiture of pay which a period three weeks of *absence without leave* during the month of January had earned him*.

On February 9, Private Keeping was again *taken on strength* by the CAMC Training School. It was to be a stay of thirty-six days, some of it undoubtedly coinciding with that detention.

The records show that it was on March 16 of 1916 that Private Keeping was struck off strength from the CAMC Training School: the reason – *Proc. o/s* (Proceeding overseas)

As Shorncliffe is adjacent to the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone, it was from there that the great majority of the Canadians after, having trained, took ship to the Continent. There appears to be no confirmation that such was the case with Private Keeping but it is likely so, and also likely that he passed through the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite only two hours or so sailing-time distant.



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

What is certain, nevertheless, is that he reported on the next day, March 17, to the Canadian General Base Depot established by that time in the vicinity of the French port-city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine. And there he was *taken on strength* by the CAMC General unit as a reinforcement.

It was not to take long for Private Keeping to make his presence felt: On March 27... *Sentenced to 14 days F.P. No 1 for while on service assaulting a comrade*. He was sent to the F.P. (*Field Punishment*) Camp on the morrow, to return from there to the Base Depot four days later.

On the very next day again, he was *struck off strength* from the CAMC, *taken on strength* by the 1st Sanitary Section and attached to the 2nd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery as Water Detail.

* * * * *

The 2nd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery was a component of the Canadian Division* and had traversed the Atlantic to the United Kingdom in the same convoy as had Private Keeping. It had also trained in the rain and snow of the Salisbury Plain before parading before the King and Kitchener on February 4 of 1915 and crossing to France only days afterwards.



**Later it was, logically, re-designated as the 1st Canadian Division on the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division.*

(Preceding page: *The British 18-pounder field gun was the mainstay of the British and Commonwealth artillery during the course of the Great War.* – photograph from 2011(?) at the Imperial War Museum, London)

It had then served in the Fleurbaix Sector to the south of the Franco-Belgian frontier and the northern French town of Armentières during its first weeks on the Continent before crossing the border into the Kingdom of Belgium in the middle of April to relieve French forces in the northern part of the *Ypres Salient*. Some of the Canadian Division's units had still been moving into position when the Germans attacked; however, in the case of the Brigade, on the evening of April 18, the unit's War Diarist could report in his journal... *second half Brigade marched from POPERINGHE and all guns were in position at 9.30 p.m.*

The 2nd Battle of Ypres saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans on the *Western Front*. That use was later to become an everyday event – employed by both sides - and, with the advent of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, it was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations.



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

(Right above: *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.

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

On the 23rd the situation was relatively stable and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a retirement became necessary due to heavy and accurate enemy artillery fire. At times there had been gaps in the British and Canadian 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. The moment passed and the Canadians began to close the gaps.



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



(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 2nd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery retired to and placed its guns astride the Canal, facing the Germans to the east (to the right) on the night of May 1-2 – photograph from 2014)



Both the Canadian artillery and infantry had fought well: the infantry had experienced problems with its Ross rifles – later to be exchanged for British Short Lee-Enfield Mark IIIs – while the artillery, if the War Diarist counting every shell is evidence, had at times been sadly lacking in ammunition.

Less than two weeks later, in the middle of the month of May, the Canadian Division was ordered south into France. The 2nd Brigade thus moved from the area of Ypres where it had still been serving, to serve in British offensives at Festubert and at Givenchy. This was to be an action fought in order to support a larger operation by French troops a little further down the line.

The British plan of attack had been less than imaginative and much of what remained of the small pre-War professional Army was shot to pieces in the course of frontal attacks.

The Canadian and also Indian troops – they too ordered to support the British effort – had hardly fared better, each contingent incurring over two-thousand casualties before this short-lived offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it 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 in the Indian Army pays his respects to the fallen at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?))



By the first week of June most units of the Canadian Division had been ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant from Festubert. Most of the infantry battalions had been ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support further British activities – and with the same results from repeating the same mistakes. On or about June 24 the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area, from where it was to move northwards and into Belgium, to the Ploegsteert Sector, just across the frontier.

****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.***

Having reached the Ploegsteert area, there the units of the Canadian Division remained. In the next number of months they all 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 it been otherwise.

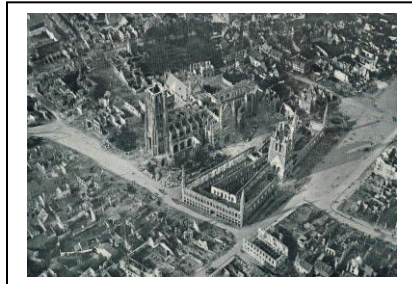


(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

From that time until the following spring the 2nd Brigade of the CFA while in the Ploegsteert Sector had positioned its Headquarters for the most part in the area of Neuve-Église. It was a quiet time which, in April of the following year, was about to change. By April 4, the 1st Canadian Division was moving north, again into the *Ypres Salient*, and so were the guns of the 2nd Brigade.

* * * * *

April 1 and 2 of 1916 were, as already recorded in these pages, the days on which Private Keeping was transferred to and attached to the 2nd Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, to serve on the Water Detail. There appears to be little information a propos the duties of the men thus employed, let alone specifically those of Private Keeping.



(Right above: *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*)

As will be seen, he was to serve close enough to the front to be wounded and, by definition, his role was to provide water for the personnel of the Brigade. But whether Private Keeping was employed in carrying water up to the front, for example, is simply not recorded. Nor are the names of the areas in which he was to serve with the Brigade to be found in any part of his own personal files.

This history will therefore trace the fortunes of the 2nd Brigade following Private Keeping's attachment to it in April until the autumn of that 1916, with the understanding that it may have everything – but perhaps nothing whatsoever – to do with his activities during that period.

In April of 1916 the 1st Canadian Division had been posted to the southern outskirts of the city of Ypres. On its right-hand side was the 2nd Canadian Division covering the area of St-Éloi – the Division having arrived on the Continent in September of 1915 – and to the left of the 1st Division, in the south-east corner of the *Ypres Salient*, was now the 3rd Canadian Division, newly-formed, and officially in service only since midnight of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916.

The months of April and May as reported in the 2nd Brigade War Diary were routine and quiet, any action by the guns being mostly of a local nature and undertaken by a single gun or battery. Many of the guns were sited on the ramparts of the Ypres from where, in a flat country, they were dominant. The only high ground in the Salient was in the area for which the 3rd Canadian Division was responsible, that of place-names such as *Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts, Hill 60, Maple Copse* and *Mount Sorrel*.

On June 2 the Germans attacked that high ground.

(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 coordinated, was to prove a costly disaster for the Canadians.



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



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

On that first day of the confrontation the 2nd Brigade had had two guns in a forward position at Sanctuary Wood. The officer in charge and the seven men with him, according to the War Diary... *were last seen beside the guns in action.*

By June 3... *the whole Brigade is now in action. All night & all day the Artillery fire on both sides was very heavy...* It was busy supporting the counter-attacks of that day by the Canadian Infantry battalions. Unfortunately, the artillery was as ill-prepared for the venture as were the foot-soldiers and confusion reigned. Despite the best efforts of both infantry and artillery, the attacks were a shambles.



For the following number of days the artillery of both sides was generally active, the *shoots* and bombardments by one side usually bringing about retaliation from the other. However, apart from a German attack at Hooge on June 6, infantry activity was low-scale and the artillery was not called upon to support the Canadian battalions in any operations.



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

Then on June 12... orders received for an all-day bombardment, fire was opened at 7.00 am and kept up at a steady rate until 12.00 noon, there was then a lull until 1 pm when it commenced again and continued until 3.00 pm.

There was a pause until 4.00 pm & then more fire until 8.00 pm, when all guns increased their rate of fire and then was a heavy bombardment until 8.30 pm when the fire lifted and then stopped. This was a scheme to deceive the enemy and make him think we were going to attack, but we didn't. (Excerpt from Brigade War Diary entry for June 6)

Some five hours later the assault was delivered. The final attack of the *Mount Sorrel* operation, preceded by a heavy barrage, courtesy of a re-organized Canadian artillery, went in as early as one-thirty in the morning of that June 13. As of eight minutes past three, some ninety minutes later, the infantry battalions were beginning to report that they were already beginning to extend and consolidate captured objectives.

(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*)



In the days that followed, the enemy guns in the areas of Mount Sorrel and Hooze were active but overall, the Germans, their infantry making no further movement, appeared to be resigned to the return to the status quo of things. Thus life returned once more to the rigours, routines and perils – the latter less frequent now – of trench warfare.

It was in the middle of August, two months later, that the entire 2nd Brigade was to leave the *Ypres Salient* – and indeed the Kingdom of Belgium – where it had been serving almost continually for eighteen months. On August 15 it began to march to the west, across the Franco-Belgian border towards to community of Arneke. Moving at a rate of about five kilometres per hours, the unit was to complete the transfer in about seven hours.

The march on the morrow was of eight and a-half hours duration, the destination was Polincove, west again, in the direction of the North Sea and the venerable coastal town of Calais. There the British Army had established a number of training grounds where the Brigade was to begin undergoing exercises on August 18, after a welcome day of rest.



(Right: *The trenches are likely in a training area in the summer of 1916. The Canadian troops here have by now both steel helmets and Lee-Enfield rifles. – from Illustration*)

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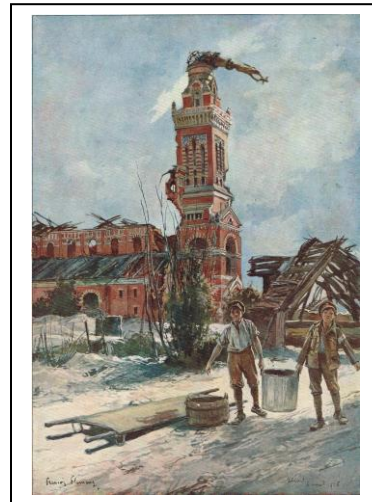
The Brigade War Diarist was most effusive in his entry of August 17: *The batteries were given a rest & allowed to settle down in their billets. A small stream runs through this village which supplies plenty of water for the horses to drink & for the men to bathe in. The people are most hospitable: the estaminets are numerous: the fruit orchards are everywhere and under these conditions the Brigade will no doubt be brought to a high degree of efficiency. Almost poetic.*

Apparently the Brigade at the time had no idea of the purpose of all the training; the War Diarist writes... *the coming operations in which we were to take part in some important part of the British front. The exact location of this spot is as yet unknown to us...*

It was on the evening of August 26 that each battery of the 2nd Brigade made its independent way to the railway station at Audruicq to entrain at different hours during that night. The journey by train took eight hours and it was not until eight in the evening of the 27th that the entire unit was assembled at Auxi-le-Chateau.

Forty-eight hours later it had marched to – and established camps in fields at – Hédauville, some ten kilometres to the north-west of the provincial town of Albert and from the front line of *the Somme*.

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



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

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

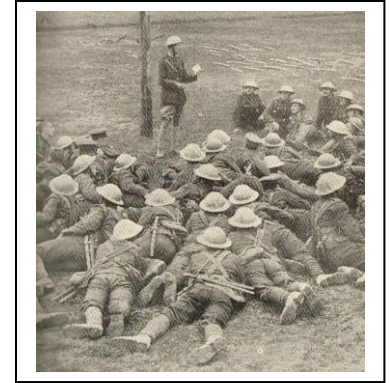
On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which had lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.



As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), had been brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first collective major action was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette on September 15.

(continued)

(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)



By the evening of August 29 the 18-pounder batteries of the 2nd Brigade had set their guns in fields in the vicinity of the community of Mesnil and of Aveluy Wood. They had spent the day registering their weapons on the German support and reserve trenches, and also on the communication trenches which connected them. This registration and also that of the heavier guns – both assisted by spotters in aeroplanes - was complete by the last day of the month.

One of the 2nd Brigade's first tasks in the 1st Battle of the Somme had been to support a local attack on German trenches in the area of the once-village of Thiepval. At ten minutes past five in the morning of September 3 the Brigade joined in the already-ongoing barrage; but the attack was a failure and by noon on that day the batteries were being ordered to cease fire – a disappointing debut.



(Right above: Gunners at the Somme – on a warmer day than most – in action with their 18-pounder guns – from Le Miroir)

Apart from a one-hour long barrage on the morning of September 9 in support of a minor raid, it had not been until September 14 that the Brigade was asked to support another infantry operation. That is not to say that it had not been busy during that period: it had been ordered transferred to a different location, near the villages of La Boisselle and Pozières, into positions that, while already having been employed by other artillery units, had not been left in a condition to the liking of the Brigade's Commanding Officer:

At each Battery all gun pits are to be made shrapnel proof and funk pits to accommodate all Battery personnel are to be made with the greatest possible speed. All ranks, including officers' servants, should be employed to secure this protection. This is no time for anyone to be too proud to work. If our predecessors had done more work there would be more of them alive today. (Transcript of a circular relayed by telephone)

The above message was likely the result on the seemingly incessant artillery action and duels ongoing in the area at this time, action which daily was resulting in casualties* among both men and horses, and also in a great deal of damage being done to ordnance and supplies.



**Although of course they were never, ever, comparable to the numbers which were incurred by the infantry battalions.*

(continued)

(Preceding page: *Ammunition being brought up to the forward area – Much of the transport of both munitions and other supplies in general was undertaken by horse-power.* – from *Le Miroir*)

The aforementioned attack of September 15 by the Canadian Corps in the area of Flers and Courcellette had been part of the general offensive involving also, on the Allied side, French, British and New Zealand troops. The 2nd Brigade had begun firing as part of the preparatory bombardment for the operation at midnight of September 14-15, before ceasing fire at twenty minutes past six as the attack went in. This was to be the first of several barrages planned by the unit for that day and for the two following, in addition to other *shoots* ordered as the necessity arose.

The infantry action at Flers-Courcellette concluded on September 17-18. But whereas the attacking battalions were relieved and/ or were withdrawn from the assault either before or on those dates – the next concerted infantry pushes were to be on September 28 and October 1 - the artillery battle never really ceased at all. It became more or less violent at times, but it never stopped.

(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

In the War Diary entry for October 7 it was recorded that the... *Enemy shelled the area around the batteries very consistently throughout the morning.* Four men were reported to have been wounded. Whether Private Keeping was one of the four is not clear as, of course, neither is his exact whereabouts.

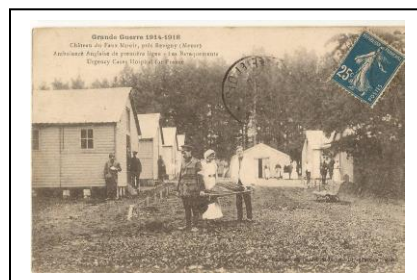
(Right above: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance* – from *Illustration* or *Le Miroir*)

Reported as having incurred a lacerating wound to the nose and scalp, Private Keeping was admitted on that day into the Main Dressing Station administered by the 10th Canadian Field Ambulance. Later during the same October 7 he was forwarded to the Corps Rest Station likely run by the 2nd Field Ambulance in Albert or in the vicinity.

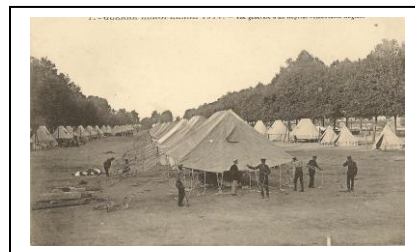
(Right: *a British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some* – from a vintage post-card)

Two days later he was apparently in need of more medical attention – perhaps an infection was setting in, always a hazard in these days before anti-biotics – and he was transferred well to the rear, to Gezaincourt, and to the 29th Casualty Clearing Station established there*.

(continued)



(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)



**Whereupon he ceased to be attached to the 2nd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery and reverted to the Canadian Army Medical Corps General.*

On the next day Private Keeping was placed onto the 31st Ambulance Train for the short journey to the 3rd Canadian General Hospital in the area of the communities of Dannes and Camiers.



(Right above: *The railway station at Dannes-Camiers through which during the Great War passed thousands of servicemen – sick, wounded or discharged from hospital - on their way to or from the more-forward areas. – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 11, he was admitted into the 3rd Canadian General Hospital where he was to remain but for three days. On October 14 Private Keeping was sent to the 7th Convalescent Camp at Boulogne. There, on November 3, he was found guilty of having overstayed a pass and of then breaking into camp: he was deprived of a total of three days' pay and, on the same day, transferred to Number 3 Rest Camp.

Three days later again, on November 6, Private Keeping found himself reporting to the Canadian General Base Depot at Le Havre. There, in the middle of that month, he was *struck off strength* from the CAMC General to be *taken on strength* once more by the 1st Sanitary Section.

There appears to be no further documentation among his files as to where Private Keeping then served – perhaps he remained at the Base Depot although he is reported a having left it on November 15; to where is *not* recorded – until Boxing Day five weeks later – when he was attached as Water Detail, on this occasion to the 5th Battalion of Canadian Infantry.

* * * * *

The 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*) was a unit of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade which was, like the 2nd Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery to which Private Keeping had previously been attached, a formation belonging to the Canadian Division (later 1st Canadian Division). The 5th Battalion had also crossed the Atlantic in the convoy which had left the Gaspé in early October carrying the Canadian Division for service in the United Kingdom before it then crossed the Channel to France in February of 1915.

In April of 1915 it also had fought at 2nd Ypres, the battle for the city of that name which had begun on the 22nd of that month with the yellow-green cloud of chlorine gas. There the name *Gravenstafel* had become one of the 5th Battalion's first battle honours.

(continued)

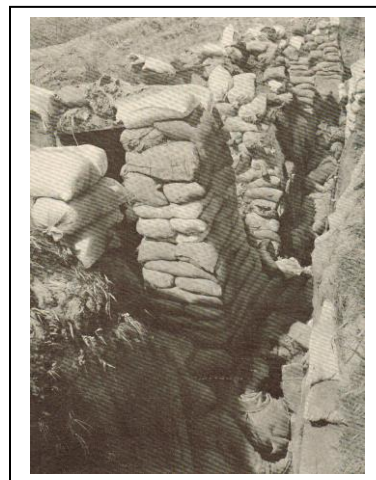
(Right: *An artist's impression of Ypres in the summer of 1915. By the end of the war there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)



Following that engagement the Battalion had then retired to the west bank of the Yser Canal which runs through Ypres before turning northwards, and then to the northern French community of Outersteene, there to rest, to re-organize and to re-enforce. All too soon, of course, it was to be fighting once more.

And once more in parallel with Private Keeping's previous unit, this next confrontation was to be in the vicinity of the French communities of Festubert and Givenchy. On this occasion it was the British – and thus the attached Commonwealth forces – who did the attacking. For little or no gain, a further two-thousand Canadian lives alone had been sacrificed.

(Right: *The Labyrinth – French-held trenches just south of the area of Festubert in the summer of 1915 after an attack, as witnessed by the corpse in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)



There followed those nine months spent in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just on the Belgian side of the frontier with France. During that time the 2nd Canadian Division – in September of that year – and then the 3rd Canadian Division – as of New-Year's Day of 1916 – had joined the 1st Canadian Division in the field.

The fight for Mount Sorrel in June of 1916 had been the next major confrontation between the Canadians and the German Army. The enemy had attacked a sector of the *Ypres Salient* which was at the time the responsibility of the 3rd Canadian Division. But the situation had deteriorated so rapidly and to such a degree that units from the adjacent 1st Canadian Division – and even from the 2nd Canadian Division serving farther afield – had been called for support.

After eleven days of sometimes horrific fighting, the opposing armies had ended back much where they had started. Little had changed, except that the cemeteries on both sides were that much fuller.

As with Private Keeping's Artillery Brigade, the 5th Battalion had then been withdrawn in mid-August for days of training in north-west France. They would be followed in their turn by units of the other Canadian divisions – by August of 1916 this was to include the 4th Division – whose places in Belgium would be taken by troops who had been withdrawn from the *First Battle of the Somme*.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Vestiges of Canadian trenches of 1915-1916 – some admittedly restored – at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The 5th Battalion had been in training as of August 15 before then being transported by train to the rear area of *the Somme* on August 28. It had then marched for the next five days towards the sound of the guns, to end at the military camp of Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the town of Albert – and within artillery range of the battlefields.

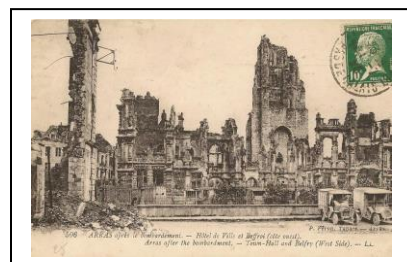
Whereas many of the now-arriving Canadian units were to fight their first major engagement of *the Somme* during the British-led offensive of September 15-17 – and some had been involved even before that – the 5th Battalion was to wait until September 26 and 27 before *going over the top*. Up until that time, even though it had moved into the forward area and the front lines during the intervening period, its losses, by comparison with other battalions, had been light: fifteen *killed in action* and ninety *wounded*.

All that changed on those two days in late September: fifty-six *killed*, three-hundred three *wounded* and one-hundred twenty-two *missing in action*. Some of these latter would have lost their way on the battlefield to later return; others would report to duty after treatment in a medical facility; and some would never be found, after some six months to be officially *presumed dead*.



(Right above: *Canadian wounded being bandaged on the field before being evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir*)

The 5th Battalion was not to play any further such role at *the Somme* although it remained in service there, again at times in the front line, for another three weeks. On October 17, even as new Canadian units of the 4th Canadian Division were arriving at the front, the 5th Battalion began to retire from the area. It at first marched in a westerly direction, then to turn north so as to pass behind – to the west – of the battered city of Arras and beyond.



(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 23, only six days after marching out of Albert, the Battalion arrived at its destination, Bajus, a commune some thirty kilometres to the north-west of the previously-cited city of Arras. It was in an area whose sectors were to now become the responsibility of the Canadian Corps for much of the remainder of the *Great War*, a region which extended from Béthune in the north to Arras in the south.



(continued)

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

The winter of 1916-1917 was one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches*. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.

****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*)

It was, as has been seen, in that December of 1916, that Private Keeping was attached to the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*).

* * * * *

Thus once again, Private Keeping had been despatched to a unit serving on the Western Front. But once more, as in the previous case, the amount of information concerning his whereabouts or his duties at any particular time is negligible. Therefore the history of the 5th Battalion will be traced from the beginning of the New Year, 1917 – to include the little that is documented of him - with the caveat that it, the history, may – or may not - pertain.

For the first twenty-four days of the month of January the 5th Battalion was stationed behind the lines in camps at Houdain and Bully-Grenay. There its personnel indulged in such things as lectures, classes, training and inspections; there was also instruction in bombing, wiring and the use of machine-guns. And during that period everyone was treated to a bath – there is no report of Private Keeping providing the water.

Towards the end of the month there was time spent in the trenches, a six-day tour. But it was very quiet, the rare war-like activities reported were enemy artillery-fire, and the Canadian response of rifle-grenades. The casualty count for the tour reflects the relative calm: *four wounded*.

All of February and the first nine days of March were likewise spent in the same forward areas; the number of casualties was similarly low; four *killed* and fifteen *wounded*, many of the latter only slightly; one of the fatalities was also classified as an accident and another as self-inflicted.

On March 10 the unit retired to the area of Écoivres-St-Éloi, there to erect tents for occupation by the Battalion. After two days of preparing the site, Private Keeping's unit provided working-parties for other various tasks, but its personnel were also instructed in the use of enemy weaponry, particularly his machine-guns.



(Right above and right: *The village of St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)

(Right below: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)



There followed a further nine days in the trenches, just as non-belligerent as before, before a return for training at Écoivres. The work assigned to the Battalion appears at this point to have increased in its intensity – at least the War Diarist seems to have thought so – much of it not just the manipulating of stores and munitions, but also the excavation of trenches and tunnels. And by now word was making the rounds of an upcoming attack.



On April 8... *In the evening 'A' and 'B' Companies special carrying party, 27 O.Rs. strong, stretcher-bearing party, 57 O.Rs. strong...and remainder of H.Q. details arrived in the trenches. A hot meal was given to all, and they then proceeded to get into the assembly positions. (Excerpt from War Diary entry of April 8)*

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army 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 daily 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 proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Preceding page: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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 – with some British units under Canadian command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

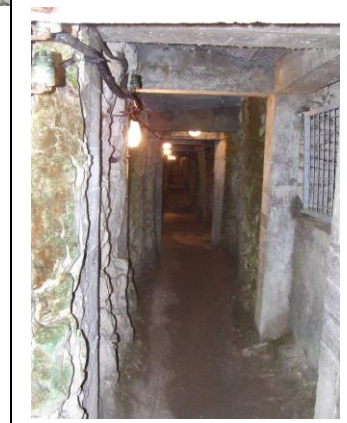
The Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions had been handed responsibility for the Ridge itself; to their immediate right had been the Canadian 2nd Division, attacking in the area of the village of Thélus on the southern slope; and to the right again the Canadian 1st Division – of which the 5th Battalion was a component - had been ordered to clear the area lower down the slope again towards the village of Roclincourt.

(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*)



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

On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks. There had on that day been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



As for Private Keeping's unit, having moved up from tunnels and dug-outs, the 5th Battalion was in position in its assembly trenches by one o'clock in the morning of April 9. Four hours and thirty minutes later the creeping barrage opened and the attacking forces left their trenches and advanced towards the enemy positions. Forty minutes later the Battalion's first objective – the so-called Black Line - was taken.

The advance continued and by nine o'clock that morning the Red Line had been reached and occupied. There the Battalion remained until six in the evening at which time it was relieved and retired to the Black Line, there to consolidate.



(continued)

The War Diarist estimated the number of casualties by that time as fourteen officers and three-hundred fifty *other ranks*.

(Preceding page: *Canadians under shell-fire occupy the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)

Three days later the Battalion was still reportedly in the Black Line. The momentum of the first day had not been followed up on the days following: orders had been to consolidate any gains in the expectation of German counter-attacks; not only that, the ground had been transformed into a morass such that it was proving more than difficult to move guns, munitions and material through the forward areas.

(Right: *German prisoners being escorted to the rear area during the attack on Vimy Ridge – from Illustration*)



Thus 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.

During the *Battle of Arras*, the success at Vimy Ridge had been almost the sole exception to the rule*, the rule being costly engagements more often than not accomplishing little or nothing. At Arleux-en-Gohelle on April 28 some ground was gained by the Canadian attackers but at great sacrifice. The confrontation at Fresnoy was otherwise; the losses there were also extensive – and the Germans retained the village.

**This was so not only for the Canadians. The British and Australians experienced bloody reverses, not to forget the Newfoundland Regiment and its four-hundred eight-seven casualties on April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux.*

(Right: *These are some of the outskirts of the city of Lens; the caption reads simply: A sector held by the Canadians – from Le Miroir*)



The remainder of the month of June and then all of July comprised once again the rotations of the troops into the front, support and reserve positions. It was to be the month of August before a further concerted effort was demanded of the Canadian Corps, and it was also to be in the same general area, albeit a little to the north of Vimy, in the outskirts of the mining centre, and the city, of Lens.

Meanwhile, during the month of July, Private Keeping had been awarded some leave. This may not have been due to his exemplary behaviour as during the month of May he had been awarded fourteen days of Field Punishment Number 1 for... *drunkenness*.

(continued)



Nevertheless, on the last day of July he had been on his way back to the United Kingdom – exactly where is not documented – from where he had reported back to the 5th Battalion on August 11.

(Preceding page: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

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



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

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

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire across No-Man's Land in 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: *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*)



Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

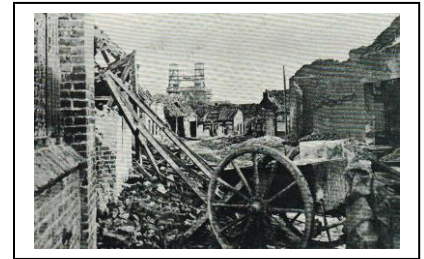
(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)



It was to the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions that had been allotted the responsibility of the capture of *Hill 70*, and the 5th Battalion was to play its role. By August 13 the 1st Canadian Division was in place in front of the village of Loos.

(Right: *The remnants of the village of Loos (see below) as it was already in early 1915 – from Le Miroir*)

The following day's entry of the 5th Battalion War Diary reads partially thus: *After dark the battalion moved out in front to the Front Line, digging themselves in ready for the attack...*



Then, on August 15... *Sharp at 4.25 a.m., the barrage opened up and the attack was launched. Two minutes afterwards, the men began to advance, and the German Front Line was taken with very little enemy opposition and very few casualties...*

...‘C’ and ‘D’ companies having taken their objectives, dug-in about 40 yards past the old German Front Line, which was afterwards heavily shelled by the enemy. ‘A’ and ‘B’ companies, following up the barrage had a large number of casualties from Machine Gun Fire before reaching (sic) their objective...

The casualties sustained in capturing this line were about 125 men.

Shortly after the Line had been taken, and the work of consolidation started, the enemy commenced shelling it, and from then on, gave the Line no peace. (Excerpts from the Report of Operation of August 14th – 18th 1917, as contained in the Battalion War Diary)

It was the night of August 16 before the 5th Battalion was relieved to fall back behind the new Canadian positions; but it was a further twenty-four hours before the unit was further withdrawn, on this occasion to fall back from the field entirely, to the rear at Les Brébis.



By this time the casualty count had increased: to thirteen officers and three-hundred fifty-two *other ranks*.

(Right above: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir*)

This Canadian-led campaign had apparently been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good its by-then exorbitant losses.

The Australians and New Zealanders – stationed further to the south than the Canadians - and then the Canadians themselves, were to be ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadian Corps was obliged to abandon its plans. There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the Lens-Béthune sectors and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area.

On most days, according to the Battalion War Diary, it was the artillery which fought it out – but, of course, the infantry was usually the target.

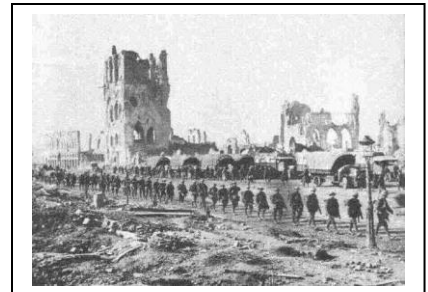
(Right: *Canadian artillery troops manhandling a gun into position 'somewhere in Flanders' during Passchendaele* – from *Le Miroir*)



Even though it was known that the Canadians were to be transferred north into Belgium, for the 5th Battalion there was to be a nine-week interlude between the action at *Hill 70* and the transfer to its next theatre of operations. During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches was still the rule - with several exceptions when the unit was retired to areas behind the lines, particularly for training, although it was also apparent from the Battalion War Diary entries that sports were being considered more and more to be a morale booster among the troops.

It was at about this time, on October 10, that Private Keeping was transferred – apparently returned to the CAMC but yet still attached to the 5th Battalion. How his duties thereupon were to vary from those of the infantryman is not to be found among his files.

On October 19 of 1917 the Canadians of the 5th Battalion were ordered north into Belgium and once more to the *Ypres Salient* which the unit had left some fourteen months before. Officially designated to be the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the last day of that July – was to come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – at least was later ostensibly professed to have been - one of the British Army's main 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*)

(Right below: *Somewhere, possibly anywhere or almost everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917.* – from *Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered 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 spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



(continued)

(Right: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

On October 19 the 5th Battalion had begun to make its way on foot north from Houdain to the area of Thiennes where it arrived two days later. On the following day it was on its way again, a five-hour march to its destination, Ferme Creve Court (the spelling according to the War Diarist), where it was to remain until November 4.

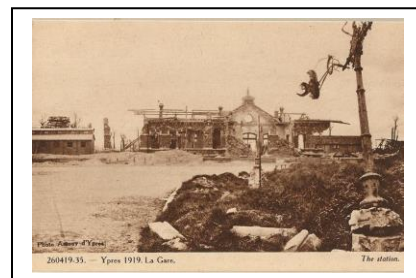
On that day the Battalion entrained at Ebblinghem station at six in the morning to cross the Franco-Belgian frontier before de-training at Brandhoek four hours later. From there it was a half-hour march before *Red Rose Camp* was reached, a mixture... of huts, tents and wrecked houses... which was to be the unit's home for the next three days.



(Right above: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

(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 October 7 the Battalion returned to the railway station at Brandhoek for the short train journey to Ypres. The station at Ypres is outside the walls so the unit would have passed through the Lille Gate to find its new quarters in the shattered city's cellars and dugouts.



The stay was of only a single day's duration. On October 8 the 5th Battalion crossed the city in a north-easterly direction to the community of St-Jean (*Sint-Jan*) in the outskirts. An attack by enemy aeroplanes on the following morning, October 9, having been beaten off by the fire of several machine-guns, in the afternoon the unit made its way towards the front, to Brigade Support, Meetcheele(?) in the vicinity of the Bevedere Spur.

Although in support, during the following days the Battalion – its four Companies to act independently wherever and whenever necessary – was heavily involved in concert with the 7th and 8th Battalions who were to deliver an attack on the morning of October 10. The 5th Battalion had already been the target on enemy guns during the night of October 9, and had thus suffered a goodly number of casualties.

(Right: *In Tyne Cot Cemetery, graves surround a German strong-point protecting the approaches to the village of Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)



The losses were to continue on the day of the attack by the 7th and 8th Battalions, it would seem to have been mostly due to the German guns: 'B' Company was reportedly down to thirty men; 'C' Company could muster only forty.

(Right below: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument – this is the ground up which the Canadians fought during those weeks of October and November of 1917. – photograph from 2010*)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist appears to have voiced no opinion as to the success or otherwise of the action. If it were a victory of sorts, then it would appear to have been a pyrrhic one as the 5th Battalion – *in support* – had incurred some three-hundred twenty casualties* during those days. It was relieved by the 58th Battalion at ten o'clock in the late evening of November 11.



**The 8th Battalion was to retire from the field about two-hundred twenty strong – less than company strength.*

Having retired to the camp at St-Jean early on November 12, the Battalion was back at *Red Rose Camp*, Brandhoek, later that same day. There it remained for three days before being bussed south-west across the border into France on November 15 and to the vicinity of the community of Merville. From there it marched southwards in stages until, one week later, on November 22, it was reported as having been posted into the forward trenches at Lievin, a westerly suburb of Lens.

The Battalion once again reverted to the grind of everyday life in the front, support and reserve areas – perhaps very welcome after *Passchendaele*.

Although the officer responsible for the War Diary appears to have neglected to enter it in his journal, the month of December offered something a little different to all the Canadian formations which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least some units, was in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

The winter of 1917-1918 was to pass very much in the manner as had the previous winters of the Great War: in stagnation. Any infantry activity tended to be local: ever-present patrols and the occasional raid – still an activity much in favour with the British High Command. The days, for the most part, were reported as... *quiet* – the exceptions to the rule being described as... *very quiet*.

(continued)

And most casualties were, as usual during these so-called *quieter* periods, as ever due to the enemy's artillery-fire and to his snipers.

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



On March 7 of that 1918, Private Keeping was once more entitled to a period of leave; in this case it was to be a two-week furlough to Paris. Upon his return he reported, on the last day of the month – where he spent the missing week and two days is not recorded - to the Canadian Infantry Base Depot by then at Étaples.

On the next day he was forwarded to the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, also in the vicinity of Étaples before being despatched ten days later again, on April 11, back to his unit. The 5th Battalion reported him as having...*returned from leave...*on April 14 .

During the time of Private Keeping's absence, a great deal had occurred on the Western Front, although not in the sectors held by the Canadian Corps.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, they delivered a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', launched 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.

(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 thus to oblige them 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 the 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 petered out at the end of the month.*

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

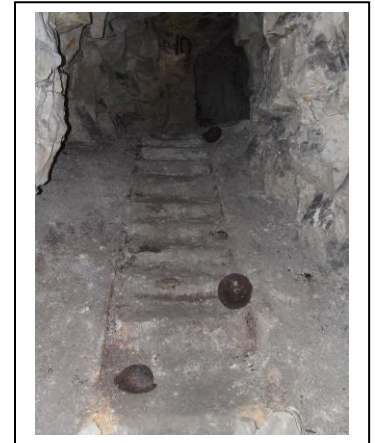


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As was the case with a great number of the Canadian units, it appears to have been several days before even the news of the German offensive filtered through let alone there being any sense of great urgency. In the case of the 5th Battalion it was not until the 25th of the month that the War Diary entry for the day makes mention of it: *Battalion was ordered to "Stand To" and be ready to move at 6 a.m. tomorrow. A hostile attack is expected in the morning.*

On the morrow the... *Battalion "Stood To" during the day ready to move off at 1 hour's notice.* But the anticipated attack did not materialize and orders were received to be at Écoivres the following morning. Two days were thereupon spent frantically driving and marching around the country side in the rain, ordered and counter-ordered, losing men and equipment, until, on March 29, the 5th Battalion found itself billeted in the community of Berneville.

A succession of postings followed, all apparently still in expectation of a further German offensive – the one in Flanders was launched as late as April 9: the Battalion moved to Arras (*Ronville Caves*), to St-Nicholas, to Arras, thence to the front line, to Bois de la Mason Blanche where it was on April 21.



(Right above: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system - hewn in the rock under much of Arras - 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(?)*)

(Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for April 21, 1918): *Enemy artillery fire was fairly active on area immediately in rear of Battalion, apparently ranging on ROCLINCOURT-BLANGY Road...and...on Railway Bridge over ST. LAURENT-FAMPOUX Road. Spasmodic shelling of dead ground...where our Field Hows. (howitzers) are located... Casualties. 1 O.R. wounded.*

Private Keeping was reported as wounded on that April 21. However, there is no further documentation of the incident until the report that he had been admitted into the 7th Casualty Clearing Station at Tincques on April 27 for treatment to a wounded nose. At the 7th CCS it was further discovered that an eye had also been injured; thus he was transported to the 24th General Hospital at Étaples on the morrow, April 28.

Eight days later, Private Keeping was released from the 24th General Hospital and sent to the 6th Convalescent Depot on April 6. Two days later again, on May 8, he was discharged from there *to duty* to the nearby Canadian Infantry Base Depot. The Depot then waited until May 22 until it saw fit to order him to the nearby Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp.

According to his records it was not to be until four months hence, on August 12, that Private Keeping was despatched from the CCRC to report to duty with the 5th Battalion. This he did, one of a reinforcement draft to do so on the 14th, at a time when the unit was resting from its recent exertions in the area of Warvillers, to the east of the city of Amiens.

* * * * *

After the German offensives of March and April, and during Private Keeping's absence, a relative calm had descended on the Western Front as the German threat faded; the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there had been nothing of any military significance lost to the Allies on either of the two fronts: in the south the Allies retained the railway network at Amiens; in the north, none of the Channel ports had been threatened.

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 re-enforce.

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

(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'. Many of the troops to be involved in the fighting from this time onwards underwent training in the company of tanks. – from Illustration)



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

It had been on the night of August 1-2 that the 5th battalion had begun its transfer from the Arras sector to the theatre to the east of Amiens. Relieved of the evening of August 1, the first stage had ended at four in the morning of the next day in huts on the main Arras to St-Pol Road.

Apparently the troops were in good spirits having conducted a successful raid on July 26, and were excited at the prospect of...*something big* – even though nothing was known about it at that stage*.



**The 5th Battalion had not been the only Canadian unit on the move at this time. Within a matter of days, at the end of July and beginning of August of 1918, it had been the entire Canadian Corps which had been transferred from the sectors north of and around Arras to face the Germans on the front which they had established at the time of their offensive four months earlier.*

The majority of the Canadian forces had passed behind the city of Amiens before turning eastward, marching during the hours of darkness, to ensure surprise. This it had succeeded in doing, as the events of the few following days were to prove.

August 3 had been a busy – and popular - day: *Pay parades – baths – Clothing parades...* then a four-hour march followed by a train-ride to an unknown destination. It was to be a twelve-hour, overnight, journey which terminated at eight o'clock the following morning in the community of Senarpont*. From now on the Canadians of the 5th Battalion would be continuing to their destination on foot.

**That day, August 4, marked the fourth anniversary of the declaration of war.*

The overnight marches went on for three more days until, at six o'clock on the morning of August 7, the destination of the 5th Battalion, le Bois de Gentelles (*Gentelles Wood*) was reached. There...*in a system of trenches on the outskirts of the wood...a well-earned rest was indulged in.*

At 9.30 p.m. the Battalion moved off to take up the assembly positions, which had been previously reconnoitred during the day by their Officers. (Excerpt from 5th Battalion War Diary entry of August 7, 1918)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist then continues with a narrative of the next morning: *A peculiar and unmistakeable atmosphere of success pervaded all ranks. This was remarked upon by many. Everything was quiet and it was evident that the enemy had no inkling of the presence of storming troops. Whirring and humming Motors of the tanks could be heard drawing nearer and nearer, and the men were warned to lookout (sic), for where they would cross the trench.*

One of our planes roared across to the enemy lines, the rum ration was issued, officers warned the men to fix bayonets in readiness to go over, an occasional enemy Very light (sic) soared into the sky, our plane came tearing back, then "CRASH", like one gun, the ear-splitting, devastating barrage opened, and fell on the enemy's lines. It must have sounded to him like the "crack of doom".

Up and over went the Battalion, tense and eager, well in hand, confident, one might say joyous, that feeling of assured success became intensified. There was a heavy ground mist which made it impossible to see 25 yards ahead, but in spite of this, well led, the men went ahead unhesitatingly, and it was necessary to restrain them, so keen were they...



(Right above: *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*)

Thus the first minutes of the attack of August 8: The confidence that the writer had seen in the faces of his men had not been misplaced; it seemed that most things would go well on that day – and the next. Whereas in past campaigns the gains, if any, had been measured in yards, those of this battle were being counted in kilometres.

(continued)

The casualties, however, were not light – and they were to become heavier – and in some cases they were not incomparable to those incurred during *2nd Ypres, the Somme, Arras, and Passchendaele*: the 5th Battalion were to count some three-hundred six, *all ranks*, on those first two days alone.

The community of Warvillers had been taken on August 9, the second day of the fighting. There the Battalion was to remain as it was now the turn of units of the 4th Canadian Division to leap-frog through and to continue the drive. The 5th Battalion was still there, re-organizing and re-equipping, on August 14 when Private Keeping's draft reported *to duty*, thus ensuring that it was re-enforced as well*.



(Right above: *Canadian and German wounded from the first days of the battle – some cases more serious than others - waiting to be evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir*)

**A further, larger, draft arrived on the following day again.*

* * * * *

It was a further two days before the 5th Battalion resumed its advance when the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade relieved the 9th Brigade (also Canadian Infantry) on the night of August 16-17. The initial momentum of the push had slowed after the success of the first days: bringing forward guns, munitions and supplies in the quantities necessary was not easy; fatigue was a factor; time was spent consolidating the newly-won positions; and the German soldier, formidable and skilled, was still willing and able to inflict punishment on those facing him.

The 5th Battalion was back in Warvillers at about mid-day of August 21, its place having been taken in the line by a regiment of French troops. This was the first step in the transfer of the 5th Battalion back whence it had come only two weeks earlier. In fact, the entire Canadian Corps was to retrace its steps – in the same manner, by night, and by routes well to the west, before being carried by bus and train – back to the Arras Sector*.

**Most of the retiring Canadian units were to be replaced by French troops.*

Only days hence the Canadians, in tandem with British troops, were to be in action once more, in another theatre, driving along the axis of the main Arras-Cambrai Road, through the battlefields of 1917. This advance was to end only on November 11, when the War-ending Armistice would come into effect.

However, in the meantime, there was work to do. By the night of August 26-27 – in fact at three in the morning - the 5th Battalion had reached its destination, billets at Anzin just to the north-west of Arras.

But the first Canadian troops to return from the *Third Battle of Amiens* to the Arras Sector were not the 5th Battalion and the 1st Canadian Division. By the time that Private Keeping's unit was settling down into its billets in Anzin, the *Battle of the Scarpe* was already almost a day old, the 3rd and 4th Divisions of the Canadian Corps having advanced some five kilometres on August 26, and having captured Monchy-le-Preux* on that same day.

****This was where, on April 14 of 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment had lost four-hundred eighty-seven killed, wounded and missing in a failed attempt to take the place.***

(Right: The re-constructed village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen from the western side: A bronze Newfoundland Caribou stands in its centre to commemorate the events and sacrifices of April 14, 1917. – photograph from 2014)



By early in the morning of August 29 the 5th Battalion had moved through Arras and along the main road to Cambrai. It had then taken up support positions in the area of Vis-en-Artois where it would still be on the next day while troops of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade advanced almost two kilometres, encountering little or no opposition.

(Right: Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery: The cemetery contains 2,369 soldiers of the Great War – originally mostly from 1918 - of whom only 885 have been identified. – photograph from 2010)



August 31 passed in exactly the same manner, the 5th Battalion still in support and still awaiting orders to advance. During this three-day period the German artillery, usually so ferociously efficient was totally ineffective: the entire casualty count of the Battalion for that period amounted to five men wounded and two mules killed.

The man reported as wounded on August 31 – unless there were others *not* reported – was Private Keeping. He was the victim of a gas-shell explosion and had suffered blistering – likely it was mustard gas in which case he was lucky not to have inhaled it.

On the same day he was evacuated to the 14th Canadian Field Ambulance at Fresnicourt* and remained there until September 13 when he was discharged *to duty*. The 5th Battalion then reported him as having returned to join the unit on the following day.

****The 14th Canadian Field Ambulance was apparently also responsible for the Corps Rest Station which is possibly to where Private Keeping was forwarded after having received his first treatment.***

* * * * *

In the meantime, Private Keeping's Battalion had been busy. On September 1, the morning after his departure for medical treatment, the unit had attacked. The German response, however, had not been as ineffectual as that of the previous days when the advance had literally been a walk-over. The Battalion now lost heavily to mortar-fire, to rifle-fire and most particularly to machine-gun fire. In the end the enemy had been forced to retire but apparently, he was still far from finished as a fighting force, as the two-hundred thirty-five casualties of the day were to testify.

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The attack continued on September 2. The Battalion had by this time received Operational Order 314 which was to be carried out by three Canadian Infantry Brigades aided by tanks. They were to break through the Drocourt-Quéant Line, part of the strong German defensive system.

The 5th Battalion was to serve in Brigade Reserve for the assault which, by the evening of September 3, had advanced into the area of the Canal du Nord, the eventual crossing of which it was expected the Germans would oppose fiercely.



On that evening of September 3 the 5th Battalion had been relieved and was withdrawn. It was to be three weeks hence before it would once again be called forward for its next offensive operation. And by that time, while it was in the rear area at Wanquetin, Private Keeping had once more reported *to duty* with his unit.

(Right above: *Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

By September 25 the unit had been transferred by train and on foot to the area of Hendécourt-lès-Cagnicourt to prepare for the forthcoming efforts of two days later. At thirty minutes before midnight of the following evening, the Battalion moved forward into its assembly trenches. It was far from being the only unit to do so as, on the following day, the Canadians were to cross the Canal du Nord.



(Right above: *German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai – from Le Miroir*)

(Excerpt from 5th Battalion War Diary entry for September 27, 1918 :) *Heavy rain fell during the night, which, although materially assisting the movement of the men into their Assembly positions, was most uncomfortable for them lying out in the open in a sunken road. Punctually at 5.30 a.m. a hurricane barrage was opened on the enemy positions and the 3rd C.I. Brigade moved to the attack.*



(Right above: *The same area of the Canal du Nord as it was almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it – photograph from 2015*)

(continued)

Everyone was in a boisterous spirit, eager and anxious to take part in the great fight. At 9.00 a.m. the Battalion moved up to take their positions for the attack in the afternoon. The CANAL DU NORD was crossed at 11.00 a.m. and the ASSEMBLY POSITION*...was reached in good time.

****For the attack by the Battalion scheduled for 1440 hours later that day; the objectives were taken on time.***

(Right above: Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bourslon Wood on September 27 – photograph from 2016)



Two days later, on September 29, the British – the Royal Newfoundland Regiment by that time a Battalion of the 9th (Scottish) Infantry Division - the French and the Belgians struck at Ypres.

By that evening Private Keeping's Battalion had advanced as far as the Douai-Cambrai Road and had taken up defensive positions against an enemy who was beginning to recover after the Canadian successes of the day and who was at times now inflicting heavy casualties upon the Canadian attackers.

On the 28th the Battalion remained in much the same position all day. At 1600 hours orders were received to the effect that the 5th Battalion was to act in support of an attack by the 8th Battalion at 0800 hours on the following morning.

The attack went in on schedule but the going proved difficult against a well-situated and determined enemy. Unable to advance because of being caught in... *extremely heavy machine gun and shell fire, and wide belts of wire entanglements...* the Battalion dug in and remained there for the rest of the day before a relief which was concluded just after midnight. *A hot meal was served to the troops as soon as they arrived. The billets consisted of old German ammunition pits, which were certainly very comfortable, their slumbers being only disturbed by the numerous heavy batteries located in this area.* (Extract from War Diary entry of September 29)

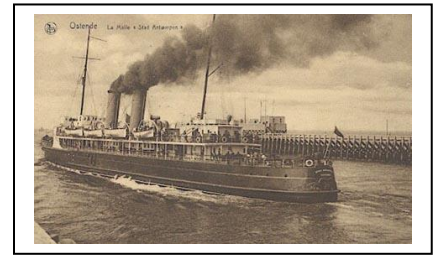
(Right: A German machine-gunner who fought to the last – from Illustration)

There appears to be no record among his papers of when Private Keeping was wounded for this fourth time, although it is likely to have occurred on either the 27th, 28th or 29th of that September. The wounds were in fact multiple: shrapnel-wounds to the left arm, the left leg and to his right buttock. By September 30 he was recorded as receiving care in the 7th Canadian General Hospital at Étapes.



(continued)

It was then soon decided to transfer Private Keeping from France back to the United Kingdom and so, on October 3, he was placed on board the Belgian hospital ship *Stad Antwerpen* for the cross-Channel journey.



Upon his arrival in England he was transported to the Fort Pitt Military Hospital in the naval town of Chatham, Kent*.

(Right above: *The image of Stad Antwerpen on wartime service is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

**On the same date Private Keeping was also transferred bureaucratically, from the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry) to be taken on strength by the Saskatchewan Regimental Depot at Bramshott.*

One report then has Private Keeping admitted into the Voluntary Aid Detachment Hospital (44) on Quarry Hill, Tunbridge Wells, from October 4 until 31 – but there appear to be no further details.

On November 3, he was forwarded to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Red Cross Convalescent Hospital - of more than twenty-two hundred beds - at Bexhill. He was to be a patient there until released as...*fit for duty*...on January 17 of 1919.

From Bexhill, Private Keeping was *taken on strength* – perhaps while awaiting repatriation for himself and his wife* - from the Saskatchewan Regimental Depot by the 15th Canadian (Reserve) Battalion which by that time, after having been stationed at Bramshott, had been re-established at Ripon. There at Ripon all was apparently well – for ten days – until January 27 when he was transported to London and admitted into the Military Hospital, Harrow Road, Paddington.

There Private Keeping was diagnosed as...*seriously ill*...with lobar-pneumonia.

**There are two entries on his pay records which display the same date: September 1, 1917.*

The first is a monthly allocation of twenty dollars from his pay to Mrs. Bessie Keeping of 45, Star Street, Edgeware Road, London. Mrs. Keeping is named on the form as his wife. The second is also a monthly allocation of twenty dollars from his pay to a Miss Annie Brown of 21, Thelma Street, Chester Road, Sunderland. She is named as his fiancée.

There appears no further mention of this person – persons? – in Private Keeping's files.

He had previously left at first a twenty-five dollar allowance, then reduced to fifteen, to his mother, from October 1914 until January, 1916, inclusive.

The son of Benjamin Keeping, telegraph operator then telephone clerk, and of Mary Louise Keeping (née *Chafe*), of 26, Cook Street, St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Ella-Clara (died an infant); Hugh (died young); to Katie (died an infant); to Gertrude – an invalid to whom he willed his all on both June 21, 1915 (see above) and April 19 of 1917; and to Ethel. (Information from *Ancestry.ca*)

Private Keeping was reported as having *died from sickness* at ten minutes to four in the morning of January 28, 1919. He passed away in the Military Hospital, Harrow Road, Paddington, City of Westminster, London.

Lancelot (*Lance*) Keeping had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-three years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, August 23, 1891.

Private Lance Keeping was entitled to the British War Medal (left) 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.

