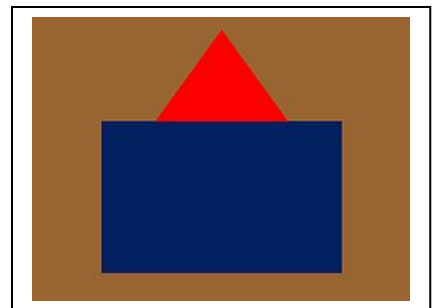




Private James Oscar Kennedy (Number 877200) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Aix-Noulette Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference I.H.24.

(Right above: *The image of the shoulder flash of the 25th Battalion is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of both firemen – whether he who extinguishes fires or he who feeds them in steam engines is not clear - and labourer, James Oscar Kennedy appears to have left little if any history of his migration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. What may be said for certain is only that he was in the Cape Breton industrial town of Sydney during the month of March, 1916, his residence at the time cited as 161, Henry Street.

It was on the ninth day of that month that he enlisted, underwent medical examination and also then attested. According to his first pay records which confirm March 9 as the date of his enlistment, it was also on this day that he was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*). These formalities were to become official some seven weeks later again, on April 29, when the Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day 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.*

By this time, Private Kennedy would have already undergone some four weeks of training in the town of Broughton*, only some twenty kilometres distant, to the south of Sydney.

**Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

However, this posting to Broughton was not to last longer than just under two months: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On or about May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled* to train together at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for overseas service.

**The 185th Battalion apparently travelled by train to Camp Aldershot on May 26.*

Towards the end of this period, Private Kennedy was encouraged to write a will. This he did on September 3, a paper on which he bequeathed his all to his father. Just over five weeks later, on the eve of his embarkation, he also chose to allot to his father the monthly sum of fifteen dollars from his pay.

It was at seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, that the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in Halifax harbour. Earlier that day the 85th and the 188th Battalions had also gone on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.



(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

On October 13th - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to march up the gangways before *Olympic* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. For the trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand five-hundred military personnel.

After an uneventful and fast crossing, the vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 19*, six days later, and the troops disembarked on that same day. The 185th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to Witley Camp in the county of Surrey.

**Sources appear to differ: it may be that Olympic docked on November 18 and that the troops disembarked on the following day.*

The original intention of the formation of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade had been to provide four well-trained battalions which, once in the United Kingdom, would be prepared for *active service* on the Continent. It soon, however, became evident that this was not to be the case.

The 1st *Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing since July 1 of 1916 and although the Canadians had not been involved until the very last days of August and thereafter, since that time many of the Canadian Expeditionary Force battalions had incurred murderous losses, and were in dire need of reinforcement. Many of the units to be found in England were thus used as pools to bring these depleted formations up to strength*.



**Apparently some eight-hundred men were transferred from the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade at this time, one-hundred ninety-two of them from the 185th Battalion.*

(Right above: a grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel – from ...)

This practice was to continue, the result being that only a single battalion, the 85th, of the four comprising the Brigade was ever to see *active service* as a unit on the Western Front.

This was to be Private Kennedy's experience: Having spent the winter and the greater part of that spring of 1917 with the 185th Battalion at Witley Camp, he was apprised of his transfer to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*).

The 185th Battalion War Diary entry of May 17 reads thus: *Order received to despatch draft of 270 men to 25th Canadian Battalion and 30 men to Royal Canadian Regiment. Rainy.*

Ten days following, the entry for May 27 continues: *Drafts ordered on 17th instant leaves (sic) Camp for Overseas at 2.00 a.m. Resultant strength of Battalion 666. Fine.*

Private Kennedy made the short passage to France – likely sailing from the English south-coast port of Southampton to the French port-city of Le Havre – from where his draft was transported to one of the four Canadian Infantry Base Depots* recently established in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étaples.

**In Private Kennedy's case likely to have been the 2nd CIBD, serving the 2nd Canadian Division.*

When exactly Private Kennedy was despatched from the Base Depot appears not to be documented, but his personal files record him as reporting to his new unit on June 16*, a day on which the 25th Battalion was to be found in the Corps Rest Area at Guoy-Servins.



**The 25th Battalion War Diary records a draft of one-hundred forty-seven re-enforcements arriving on the previous day, June 15.*

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

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some twenty-one months by this time, since September of the year 1915. It was a unit of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the Western Front.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It was at a place to the south of Ypres named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then attacked. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



Towards the end of that confrontation the 25th Battalion had relieved another battalion and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date.

(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

Then six weeks afterwards, in June, the Battalion had been involved in the fighting in the area of *Hoge, Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse*, all just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust which had begun on June 2, but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division had played its role, manning front-line trenches in the area of Zillebeke for three days.

The name of *Mount Sorrel* became the first battle honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.

(Right below: *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)

From the middle of June up until August 27 of 1916, the 20th, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14. Some two weeks later, the unit was withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde, and to the village of Moule.



The following week at Moule was spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly to plan.

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 having cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

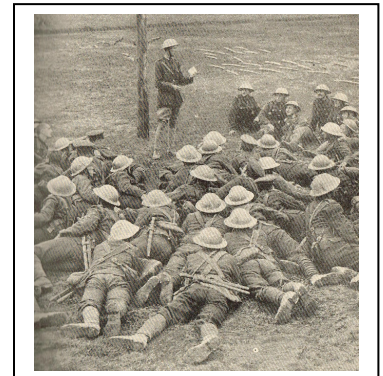
(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette* – photograph from 2015)

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



As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were 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 major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette (see below), September 1916.* – from *The War Illustrated*)



Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10 the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert. On the 11th, 12th and 13th the unit trained – at times in co-operation with aircraft – and provided working-parties.

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

On the afternoon of October 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

(Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916): *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcellette... the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who went over *the top* on the day of the assault, the War Diary recorded thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.

**It seems likely that some of the missing later returned to duty as a later Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

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

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as KENORA and REGINA... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right above: *Ninety-eight years later, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)



(Right below: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and made its way westwards and then northwards, passing to the west of the city of Arras to the region of the mining centre of Lens. It remained in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay for the next four months or so before returning southward to Neuville St-Vaast. One of the neighbouring communities, in German hands at the time, was the village of Vimy.



(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)



Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the Battalion was withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, there to undergo intensive training. The exercises were to last until, and including, April 7, only two days before the training was to become the real thing. On the final five days, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked.

On April 8... *Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route...* (Battalion War Diary). It apparently did not pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

(Right below: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

On April 9 in that spring 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 positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



While the British campaign proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive at *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

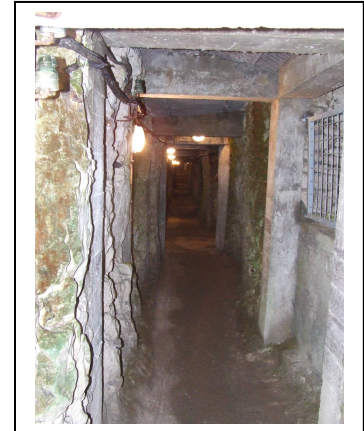
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there were even British troops operating under Canadian command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



The Canadian 2nd Division had not been responsible for the taking of Vimy Ridge itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack. The Battalion's objectives were apparently soon captured and much of the remainder of the day was to be spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

The Germans, having lost *Vimy Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, had retreated some three kilometres in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times was made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May.



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

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

There had been, on the first days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day's success proved to be logistically impossible. Thus the Germans were gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* 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 – which was the situation into which Private Kennedy reported *to duty* on or about that June 16, 1917.

* * * * *

At the time of Private Kennedy's arrival the 25th Battalion was in reserve, resting and training – if that is not a contradiction – in the vicinity of the community of Gouy-Servins, in the mining area of the city of Lens.

Having then spent the *entire* month of June in the *Rest Area*, on July 1 the 25th Battalion was ordered to move forward once more and by the 3rd it had relieved two battalions of the British Leicestershire Regiment in the forward area.

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 also his reserves - from this area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



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 Miroir*)

One of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.



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

Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of the first day of the attack, 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 above: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)

Of course, the Germans were not the only ones to incur casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion retired on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*.

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



The son of James F. Kennedy, fisherman, and of Sarah Kennedy (née *O'Brien* (also found as simply *Brien*)), of Chapel's Cove, Harbour Main, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Mary-Gertrude, John, Maurice-Martin*, Cecilia, to Bernard P., to Leo and to Gregory-Christopher.

**likely but needs confirmation*

Private Kennedy was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 15, 1917, during the fighting at *Hill 70*.

(Right: *A family memorial commemorating the life of Sarah Kennedy and the life and sacrifice of James, killed in action in France, stands erected by James F. Kennedy in Avondale Cemetery. – photograph from 2015*)



James Oscar Kennedy had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-one years: date of birth in the District of Harbour Main, Newfoundland, October 30, 1894.

Private James Oscar Kennedy 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 25, 2023.

