

Private Percy King (Number 68302) of the 25th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 26-30.

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

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner, Percy King has left little or nothing in his documentation a propos his migration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with any certitude is that he was residing in the Cape Breton community of Glace Bay in March of 1915, for this was where and when he enlisted.

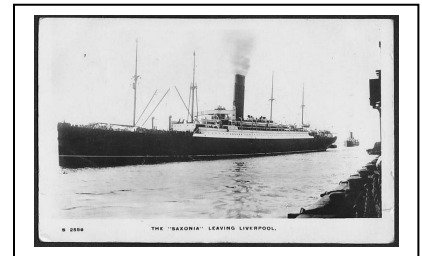
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His records show that Percy King presented himself for medical examination on March 24 of that 1915 before then enlisting and undergoing attestation seven days later, on the last day of that month. The first unit by which he was *taken on strength* was the 40th Overseas Battalion (*Nova Scotia*), the date of his attachment documented on his first pay records as having been April 16*.

But this last date does not appear to be correct. The official conclusion to the formalities had already been brought about on April 14. On that date the Officer Commanding the 40th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel W.H. Gilbourne, had 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.*

On April 22 Private King was transferred to another unit, the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*). It was to be only a month later that he was to be on his way across the Atlantic Ocean en route to the United Kingdom.

On May 20, Private King's 25th Battalion embarked in the harbour at Halifax onto His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia*. Also taking passage on the vessel was the 22nd Battalion of Canadian Infantry for a total of two-thousand two-hundred seventy-four military personnel passengers.



(Above right: *The photograph of 'the Saxonia leaving Liverpool' is from the Old Ship Photo Galleries web-site.*)

Saxonia sailed later on that same day. On the 29th of the month she put into the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport. From there the 25th Battalion was transported by train to the fledgling Canadian military complex of Shorncliffe, *it* in the process of being established adjacent to the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone. It was there that the units of the soon-to-be 2nd Canadian Division were undergoing training preparatory to their disembarkation on the Continent.



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

For Private King there was less than four months to wait.

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it was therefore as a unit of both of these formations that the 25th Battalion sailed from England on September 15 of 1915.

On that day it had marched to the pier in the harbour at Folkestone and had boarded one of the many troop transports there at the time.

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The vessel sailed at ten o'clock that evening, two hours later docking in the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite at one o'clock in the morning*. There remained only an hour's march to the rest camp at Ostrohave.

**There is a one-hour time difference between Great Britain and France.*

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

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

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

According to the 25th Battalion War Diarist of the time, each of the first seven served on the Continent was a...lovely day...even the first several during which the unit marched goodly distances.

By September 20, the Battalion had reached its destination and a number of platoons left for the trenches. Two days later the entire unit moved into the forward area and took over a sector, relieving a British battalion, the 2nd Kings Own.

(Right: British troops in trenches in the Ypres Salient: the photograph was taken during a period early in the war as no steel helmets are being worn. – from Illustration)

On September 25 the Battalion War Diarist recorded a casualty: Lance Corporal J.A. McLean was sniping, having claimed two hits before the top of his head was shot off. After two hours he died. He may have been the 25th Battalion's first fatality.

By the end of September, the 2nd Canadian Division was very much in the sectors that it was to occupy and for which it was to be responsible for almost a year. The Division had not been posted to the Ypres Salient itself but rather to the south of the city to that part of the line leading towards the Franco-Belgian frontier. To its right, in the *Ploegsteert Sector* was stationed the veteran 1st Canadian Division which had been in France and Belgium since February of that year.

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The 25th Battalion now had some eleven months ahead of in during which time it would become as accustomed as was ever possible to the routines and rigours of life in – and out of - the trenches of the Great War*.

**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, 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.*

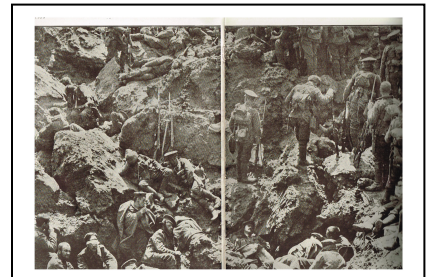


Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme (see below) in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier – likely while still in Belgium - having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)

It was not to be until early April of 1916 that the 2nd Canadian Division was to undergo 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 detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then attacked with infantry. 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 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 were to have won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



Towards the end of that confrontation the 25th Battalion relieved another Canadian battalion, the 18th, in the craters in the forward area and subsequently 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)

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The 25th Battalion War Diary entry for April 14 reads as follows: *Enemy attacked No 4 Crater, coming over about 200 strong were repulsed by us with M. Guns and bombs leaving a great many dead & wounded, this crater was garrisoned by Lieut E Morgan & Lieut LH Johnstone 35 O.R. Our Casualties being 8 Killed & 6 Wounded in this crater.*

Our casualties in No 5 Crater were 3 Killed and 8 Wounded. Shelling still very heavy on craters, front line and support trenches. Total casualties during tour in front line 2 officers shell shock – killed 18 OR. wounded 42 OR. Battalion relieved by 24th during night 14-15...

The son of Eliza Morgan of 523, Pape Avenue, Toronto – later of 2A, Dovecote (?) Road, Toronto – to whom he had allotted a monthly seventeen dollars from his pay on June 1, 1915, and to whom, just four days afterwards, he had willed his all.

Private King was reported as having been *killed in action* on April 14 of 1916 in the fighting at the Mount-Éloi Craters. A burial report was registered on May 16, but it is surely certain that either the location was forgotten or misreported, or that his grave was destroyed in subsequent fighting.

Percy King had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-four years and three months: his date of birth at Twillingate, Newfoundland, was December 25, Christmas Day, 1891.

(Right: *The sacrifice of is Percy King* honoured by this plaque to be found on the Old Methodist Church building in Twillingate – photograph from 2014*)



**While the plaque honours a Pearce King, there was apparently no such-named fatality from either the Newfoundland Regiment or from the Canadian Army reported during the Great War.*

Private Percy King was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 27, 2023.

