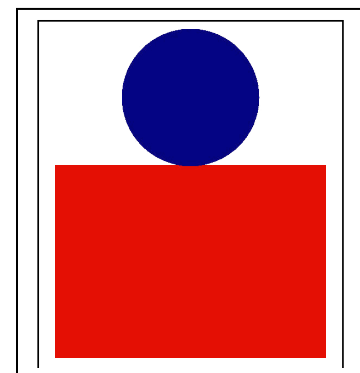


Private George Patrick Kirk (Number 47013) of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.)

(continued)

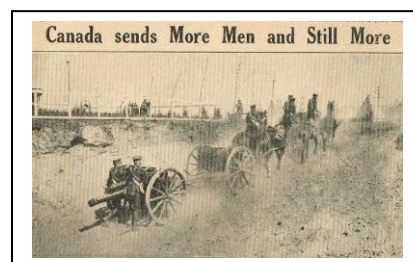


His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, George Patrick Kirk appears to have left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Even then, the only information a *propos* is that, at the time of his enlistment, his mother* was residing in the town of Stellarton, Pictou County.

**To complicate matters, his mother is referred to variously as Kirk, Quirk and Quick – and there is a further source which records her as having been un-married. Any other information from any source appears just not to be available.*

Neither Private Kirk's first pay records nor his first medical report appear among his papers to allow the confirmation of the date of his enlistment; his attestation papers remain our only original source of information. These documents bear the date of August 26, 1914, the venue *Camp Valcartier*, Québec, and also record that a medical examination was undertaken, at Valcartier, on August 29, a procedure that pronounced him as...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.*

(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 – but also at some distance 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*)



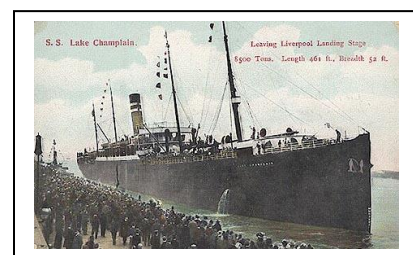
It was also on or about this latter date that Private Kirk was *taken on strength* by the 17th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*)*, perhaps at the time when the Commanding Officer of that same unit, Lieutenant S.G. Robertson, brought a conclusion to the formalities of enlistment when he declared - on paper – that...*George Kirk...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**The Battalion's War Diary refers to the unit as the 17th Battalion, Nova Scotians.*

Things then moved quickly. On the following day, September 30, Private Kirk and the 17th Battalion were ordered on board ship in the port of Québec. On the same day at Québec they were joined on the vessel by the (1st) Divisional Cyclist Company for the slow downstream journey to the area of *la Gaspé*.

At *la Gaspé* their ship, the Canadian Pacific Line SS *Ruthenia*, was to congregate with the thirty other troop carriers and seven escorts of the Royal Navy which, on October 3, were to begin the trans-Atlantic crossing in convoy to the United Kingdom*.

(Right: *The image of a pre-War Lake Champlain, before she became Ruthenia, is from the bing.com/images web-site.*)



(continued)

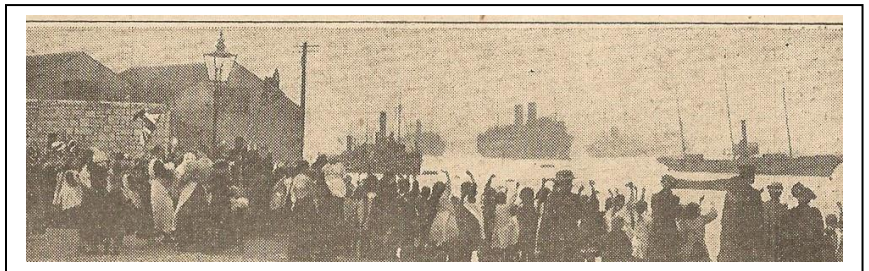
****On August 4, while travelling along the south coast of Newfoundland, the convoy was joined by the Bowring Brothers' ship Florizel which was carrying the First Five Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment to England.***

Following a smooth – from all points of view – crossing of the Atlantic, the convoy entered the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport during the afternoon of October 14*. Many of the arriving units, however, were obliged to remain on ship for days before their disembarkation could be effected.

****The original destination had been the much larger port-city of Southampton, but a submarine scare had forced a change in plans.***

Such was the case of the 17th Battalion which apparently was not to come ashore until seven o'clock in the evening of Wednesday, October 21, and then only to march to North Road Station to board trains for the journey to the *Salisbury Plain*. This had been accomplished by fifteen minutes past ten that evening. It was to be a long night.

The station at Patney was reached five hours later, from where the unit was then to march for almost four hours to reach *Pond Farm Camp*, a subsidiary encampment of the British military complex there on the Salisbury Plain.



Within days the entire *Canadian Expeditionary Force* was to be transported to this area where – with a few exceptions - it would remain for the following sixteen weeks.

(Right above: *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*)

By the morrow of its arrival at *Pond Farm Camp*, a daily routine had been established, a routine that was to be followed until the time of the unit's departure for France, although, for the 17th Battalion, with at least a change of venue on November 21: on that date the unit moved to *Bustard Camp* which had just been vacated by the PPCLI which had been ordered to serve with a British Brigade on the Continent.

By that time, however, Private Kirk had already been making himself known to the Camp and Battalion authorities: 27/10/14 – *Pond Farm Camp* – *Fined 6 shillings for drunkenness & awarded 6 days CB (Confined to Barracks) – 28 days detention by CM (Court Martial) for refusing to obey an order – 28 days detention & pay stopped for breaking arrest and leaving Guard Room without permission.*

It should be remembered that British Army regulations of the day – to which the Canadians adhered - 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*.

(continued)

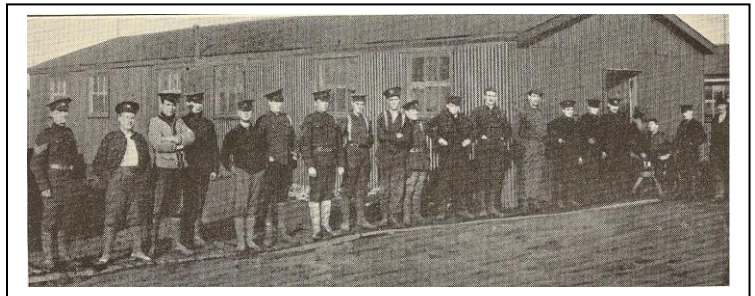
Since the majority of the Canadian new-comers had received little training, if any – as was the case with Private Kirk - the just-arrived infantry battalions were to spend the remainder of October and up until the first week of February, 1915, in becoming proper *Soldiers of the King* – even if they were *colonials*.

The months of that late autumn and of the following winter were to be just as hectic in other ways: There were to be visits from politicians and generals – and even one from the King and Queen, with the requisite preparations for such an occasion.

By the end of January a decision had been made by the upper echelons by which Private Kirk's 17th Battalion, rather than proceeding to *active service* with the Canadian Division on the Continent, was to remain in the United Kingdom as part of a reserve and training force, to be initially stationed at nearby Tidworth.

Private Kirk, however, was now to be transferred to one of the battalions which was soon to take ship for France and for service to the *Western Front*. The unit by which he was subsequently *taken on strength* on January 31 of 1915 was the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) which, for the next few days, was to remain at *Lark Hill Camp, Salisbury Plain*.

Those few days later, on February 4, 1915, the Canadian Division marched to a review area where it was inspected by His Majesty, King George V and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener*. Only days later, Private Kirk was to be on his way to the Continent and to *active service* on the *Western Front*.



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

(Right above: *Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire, adjacent to the 1st Canadian General Hospital Headquarters – from The War Illustrated*)

(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – from Wikipedia*)



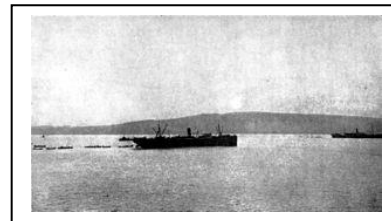
Towards the end of the first week in February preparations were well under way for departure with trains being loaded and sent in the direction of the port-city of Bristol from where the Canadian Division was to sail. By February 10, and for the next couple of days, the trains were now to be carrying the Division's personnel.

At Avonmouth, Port of Bristol, the 13th Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Novian*, the ship then sailing as part of the Canadian Division Armada at dawn on the morning of February 12.

(continued)

The Battalion personnel apparently endured a very rough and unpleasant voyage, the ship's captain having taken the decision to head out to sea and into the wind to avoid serious injury to the horses: it also prolonged the agony for the wretchedly-ill troops.

Three days later, on February 15, the vessel dropped anchor in the French port of St-Nazaire on the coast of Brittany, its passengers looking forward to standing once again on *terra firma*. Many were still feeling the ill-effects of the voyage and were apparently less than happy to then be kept on board ship for that night before being transferred to trains early on the morning of the 16th.



They were then even less overjoyed to learn that it was they who first had to unload the ship, the dockers having gone on strike.

But, if consolation there were, it was that the horses were apparently no worse for wear.

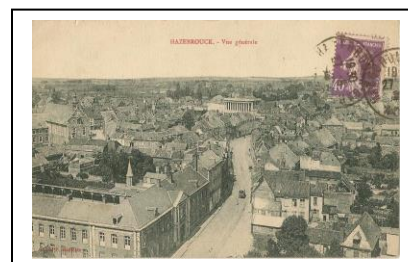
(Right above: *The accompanying caption records this photograph of Novian as having been taken during the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. – from the Wikipedia web-site*)

From the railway station in the port of St-Nazaire the 13th Battalion was to move north to the town of Hazebrouck and to the *Fleurbaix Sector*.

It required more than two days and two nights to travel six-hundred eighty kilometres – travelling in those well-documented and uncomfortable wagons of the period labelled ‘*40 HOMMES-8 CHEVAUX*’ – to reach the unit’s destination. At Hazebrouck the unit... *got off stiff and sore after our long and cramped journey, fell in and marched eight miles, through pouring rain, to FLETRE* (from 13th Battalion War Diary).

The War Diarist in his entry also noted that each man was carrying his thirty-six kilos (*eighty pounds*) of kit, all the way to the Battalion’s billets.

(Right: *The northern French town of Hazebrouck, the picture likely taken at some time between the two World Wars – from a vintage post card*)



Four days later, on February 23, the 13th Battalion was once more on the march: *Paraded at 8 a.m. and marched to ARMENTIERES, 17 miles, very hard on the feet, roads paved with cobble-stones nearly all the way. Arrived at ARMENTIERES at 2.30 p.m. and were billeted in the Workhouse.* (Excerpt from the 13th Battalion War Diary)

(Right: *Troops – in this case likely British – on the move either in or towards Belgium in the early days of the Great War. Canadian units – apart from distinguishing badges and flashes – were to wear the same uniforms and, except for their rifles and machine-guns (which were later to be replaced) – had much the same equipment. – from a vintage post-card*)

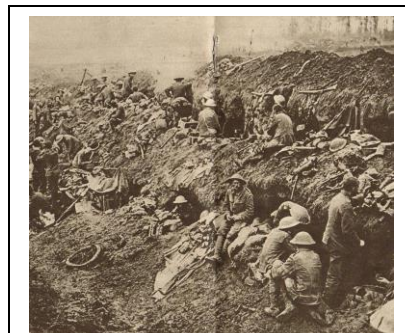


On the next day again the troops began to undergo their first experiences of the trenches under the supervision of the British troops already there*.

**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 the forward area, the latter furthest away.*

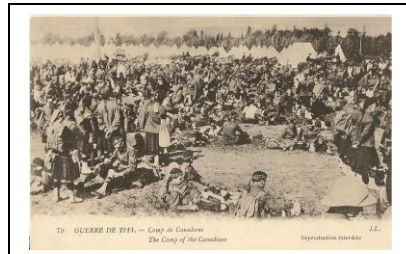
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right: 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)



On March 2 the 13th Battalion was ordered to march to the area of Sailly (likely *Sailly-sur-la-Lys*). There it was to experience more of the everyday drudgery of the front lines, the support area and the reserve sectors during the following twenty-four days. Judging from the sparse 13th Battalion War Diary entries for that time, there was very little to report.

(Right: The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card)



(Right below: The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site)

Meanwhile, on April 7 the Battalion had begun the transfer which was to see it posted to the *Ypres Salient*. On the 15th of the month it crossed the Franco-Belgian frontier and, after travelling by bus on the morrow, found itself near the villages of St-Jean and St-Julien to the north-east of the already shattered medieval city of Ypres.



It was apparently during these days during which the Canadians made their way to the Ypres Salient, that Private Kirk once more found himself doing those things he ought not to have done; on this occasion he had been...*Drunk and using abusive language to NCO...* for which he was awarded twenty days of *Field Punishment Number 1*.

**This punishment involved being hand-cuffed and/ or fettered and being tied to an immobile object for up to three hours per day – plus extra hard labour. However, given the impending events, it is difficult to see how this penalty was then to be enforced.*

(continued)

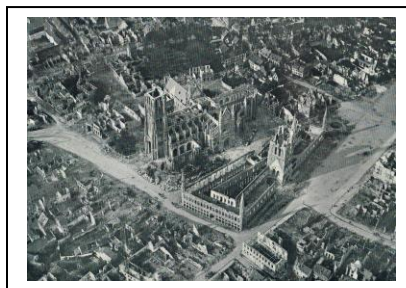
(Right below: *Troops being transported towards the area of the front by bus, the vehicles requisitions from the London transportation system – from Illustration*)

During the first five days of the 13th Battalion's posting to the *Salient* all was quiet, the Battalion War Diarist even remarking that the... *Weather all that could be desired*. Then the dam broke - although gas it was, rather than water, which was to threaten to sweep all before it. The date: April 22, 1915.



(Right below: *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*)

The 2nd Battle of Ypres saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.



(Right: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir*)



The cloud was first noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered, particularly that of the 13th Battalion which was obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, by the entire unit became necessary.

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

By the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement became necessary. At times there had been breeches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.



The 13th Battalion was relieved on April 25 and was withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, it remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it withdrew into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres. On May 3 the unit was ordered to move into northern France, to the area of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.



(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)

The information to be gleaned from the Battalion War Diary during the period of 2nd Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred was apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5th Brigade Diary – but it was on April 28 that a re-enforcement draft of two-hundred seventy-six *other ranks* reported *to duty* to the unit.

In mid-May the 13th Battalion moved down the line to the south, over the Franco-Belgian frontier, and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further again to the south and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain some three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not possessing the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered.

The role of the 13th Battalion was to relieve the 16th Canadian Battalion after its attack planned for May 20 on a German-held position, and then was to consolidate and defend that same position. Despite incurring heavy losses the 16th captured its objective, positions which then the 13th Battalion occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men fought and repelled a strong German counter-attack before then being relieved on the following day again.



The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, were to fare hardly better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – having employed the same tactics - was likewise to prove a failure but on an even larger scale: their campaign eventually 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.*

(Preceding page: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

On May 22 the 13th Battalion marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. This reprieve was to last for two weeks, until June 5, when the unit was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, another small village not far distant from Festubert.

Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and incurring many of its casualties, although fewer, due to repeating the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert – by June 24 the 13th Battalion was retiring from the area. At about the same time, over a number of days, so was the entire Canadian Division.

**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.*

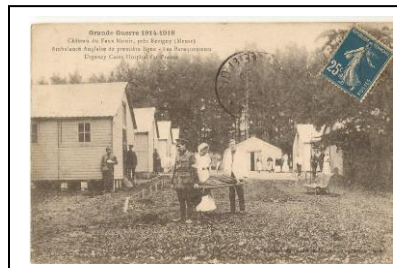
As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 13th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then Steenwerck, all in the vicinity of the town of Bailleul. From there Private Kirk's unit was to move eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert – it is also the name of a border town - on July 5, there the 13th Battalion remained – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it 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*)

On July 24 Private Kirk was admitted into the 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance, established at the time to the rear in the community of Bailleul on the French side of the frontier. He remained under medical care for a total of twelve days, at some time being transferred to the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance, also at Bailleul, from where he was discharged back to duty on August 5.

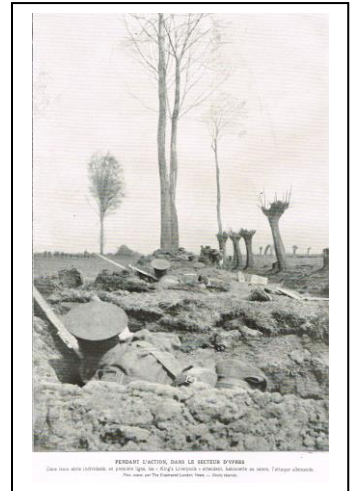


(Right above: *a British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some, and likely at a later period of the War – from a vintage post-card*)

(continued)

It was to be another eleven months before the 13th Battalion* became involved in any further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers ensured a constant flow of casualties.

(Right: *Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the war as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which began to come into use only in the spring of 1916. – from Illustration*)



In September of 1915 it was the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the *Kingdom of Belgium*. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent and to the north of the one held by Private Kirk's 13th Battalion and the other units of the now-designated 1st Canadian Division.

The *Ploegsteert Sector* was to prove a calm area during much of the *Great War*, the spring of 1918 the exception to the rule when the German launched their offensive, *Operation Georgette*, which was then to overrun much of the area at the time before being held. However, the final days of 1915 were to prove quiet enough for Private Kirk to be granted a nine-day leave – although no details appear to be available one might speculate...*Paris?*

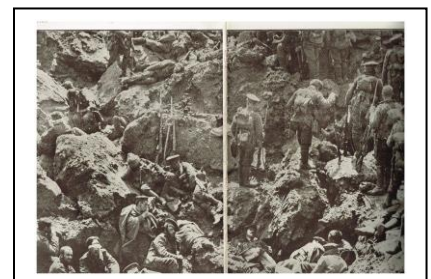
The area where the 2nd Canadian Division had been posted, to the *north* of the town of Ploegsteert, was also several kilometres *south* of the city of Ypres and it was there, at St-Éloi, after some seven months of life in and about the trenches, that the 2nd Division was going to fight its first major action of the *Great War*.

For that reason, for the personnel of the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April, 1916, were to be far less tranquil than those being experienced during the same period by the battalions of Private Kirk's Division.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* – undertaken to negate *the Bluff*, high ground under German control which dominated the British and Canadian positions - officially took place from March 27, until April 17 of that spring of 1916.

St-Éloi, as already recounted, was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. This was followed immediately by an infantry assault.

(Right: *A purported occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the detonation of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration*)



(continued)

After a brief initial success the attack soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2nd Canadian Division affair and the personnel of the 13th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery.

His own personal papers now document that Private Kirk was at this time – on April 24, 1916 – attached to the YMCA Services*, although how this transfer came about appears not to have been recorded – neither is information as to where he was to serve this period.

**The YMCA (Young Men's Christian Organization) became involved during the Great War in organizing various services for the troops during the conflict, both on the Home Front and in the field. Apparently after May of 1917 a total of just under four-hundred officers and other ranks were officially seconded from the Army to this end.*

Before that, personnel was borrowed as the need arose, this being the category into which Private Kirk was to fall. Although what exactly his duties were is not noted among his papers, they might have included such tasks as serving tea in front-line dug-outs, providing entertainment to troops in the rear area, undertaking barber services or writing letters for illiterate soldiers...the list goes on.

He would return to duty with his 13th Battalion almost six months later, on October 17, 1916. During the period of his absence his unit had been busy.

* * * * *

In March and April of 1916 the Canadian 1st Division had been transferred from the *Ploegsteert Sector* to the area of *the Salient* comprising the southern outskirts of Ypres. It was still adjacent to the Canadian 2nd Division, but now to its left-hand and northern flank. And the 3rd Canadian Division – having officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916 – had recently taken over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of *the Ypres Salient*.

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* was to be fought out between the German Army and the Canadian Corps.

The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they were not to exploit.

(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches still at Sanctuary Wood and which date from the events of 1915-1916 – photograph from 2010*)



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

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted – perhaps a bit precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks not to go in – those that did had gone in in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy would remain in the captured positions. Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



(Right below: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel* – photograph from 2014)

At the outset, the events of that June 2 had interrupted a busy day for the 13th Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports in the afternoon.

Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3rd Division sector, orders had been given... *for the Battalion to 'stand to' and be ready to move at a moment notice... Soon after this the Battalion was ordered to proceed to the support of the Canadian 14th Battalion and made a forced march... to Zillebeke Etang...* (Excerpt from 13th Battalion War Diary)



The 13th Battalion, however, were not to be involved in the disastrous counter-offensives made by Canadian troops on June 3; it had been busy, but engaged in only defensive activities. Even so, the casualty count for those two days, June 2 and 3, were to number forty-four.



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

On June 4 there was to be no concerted action by the Canadians; the 13th Battalion had spent much of its time consolidating positions and sending out reconnaissance parties, all the time receiving the attention of the German artillery. Casualties for that relatively quiet day had amounted to a total of forty-eight.

The War Diarist's entry for June 5 reports no infantry action undertaken by the 13th Battalion. It had reported, nonetheless, a further thirty *killed in action, wounded or missing in action.*

(continued)

On June 6 the War Diarist' entry once again reports little activity in the area occupied by the 13th Battalion. Nor does he mention – but, then, he may well have been unaware of it – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at Hooze village. The Germans had then managed to gain some territory before their advance was to be contained.

The unit had suffered a further half-a-dozen casualties on that day.

Late in the night of the 7th, following an exceptionally uneventful day – by the standards of the time – and with no casualties due to enemy activity, the Battalion had been withdrawn to the south-west of Ypres to arrive in its billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8th.

There the unit would remain until June 11 when it had begun a march which was to bring the Battalion, and others, back to the area of *Mount Sorrel* where it and they were to serve in the now-imminent assault.

By midnight of that June 12, some twenty-eight hours after having begun its return march to the forward trenches, the 13th Battalion had reached its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry for June 12-13) *At 1. 30 a.m. immediately our artillery lifted to the old British trenches, our men, the first and second line under Major K.M. Perry, the third and fourth under Major G.E. McCuaig sprang up on the parapet and set off at a steady pace, over very rough ground and through a heavy barrage and succeeded in gaining the first objective...*



As soon as the bombardment of the old British lines lifted at 1.50 a.m. the party again advanced at this stage the going was very heavy...

(Right above: *Shell casings – and the occasional unexploded one – return to the surface each year – photograph from 1914 (?)*)

The attack proceeded briskly, bombing the enemy down the trenches, and directly the final objective was reached, Major McCuaig sent up a red flare...

The affair had been over by mid-morning, the remainder of the day to be spent in consolidation, taking care of the wounded of both sides and of prisoners... and in the burial of the dead. The 13th Battalion had retired later that night.



(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 – and then of 1917 - in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooze, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government – photograph from 2014*)

(continued)

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 to 13 – had thus culminated with this second and incomparably more successful – it having been better prepared and also better-supported by a confident artillery programme - counter-attack by the Canadians on June 13.

This action was to be the final offensive of the confrontation, a military *quid pro quo* which left both sides in approximately the same positions that they had been occupying on June 2 when the affair had started.

For the two months which succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things had reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was to be no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity having again been limited to raids and patrols. However, this would not preclude a lengthy casualty list at times*.

**For example, during the tour in the front lines of July 15 to 19 inclusive, the War Diarist noted fifty-seven killed, wounded and missing in action.*

During the month of August the Canadian Battalions were gradually to be withdrawn from the *Ypres Salient* and ordered to camps in nearby northern France for training in what would be termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 13th Battalion had been one of the first to retire, to leave the forward area for Brigade Support on August 7, then three days later having moved further to the rear area to begin that period of training.

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, the 13th Battalion had moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer. The unit was to entrain there at seven o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres where it had arrived, some nine hours afterwards, at four o'clock in the afternoon.



From there it was a further eight kilometres – this time on foot – to the awaiting billets.

(Right above: *Almost a century after the 13th Battalion passed through it on the way to the First Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation* – photograph from 2015)

For the following four days the personnel of the unit had then marched to the south-east, to end the trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1. They were to move into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.



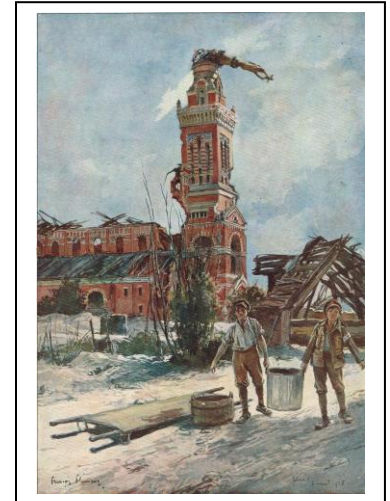
(Right above: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle* – photograph from 2011(?))

**La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

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 short space of only four hours - of which nineteen-thousand dead.

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

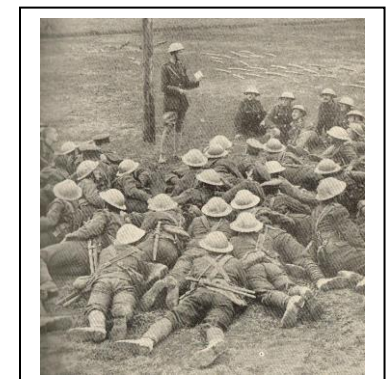
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland 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 to be brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians would enter the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first *collective* contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

(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*)

However, there was to be, twelve days before that general attack by the Canadians, on September 3, an assault put in by the 13th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force at a place known as *Mouquet Farm*. Two Companies of the 13th Battalion (*Canadian Infantry*), 1 and 2, were sent forward to assist in this operation at nine o'clock that morning.



The 13th Battalion War Diary for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially thus: *At 2.00p.m. No.3 Company... went forward and at 5.00 p.m. the remainder of the Battalion:-*

Headquarters – Pozieres Wood

Nos 1 and 2 Companies advanced and held the positions 73 to No. 1, 93 to No. 2 and consolidated.

No. 1 Company, Bombing the German Communication, and No. 2 Company, repelling a German Attack...



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

...During the whole of Sunday Night, the men were heavily shelled, but showed great courage and endurance (sic).

Sept 4th. ...The heavy shelling continued the whole of the day, on the Front and Support Lines, the Battalion also suffered a heavy Counter Attack. We managed however to connect up 55 and 59 and make a fair trench...

1916 5th Sept. ...The heavy shelling continued again on both sides, during the whole of the day, our Artillery was very active with guns of all Calibres, and fired over about two shells for every German one...

Maybe not a major affair in the eyes of certain authorities, the action at *Mouquet Farm* on September 3 and 4 was to cost the 13th Battalion a total of three-hundred twenty-three casualties.

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



The 13th Battalion was to remain in the forward area until September 7, then in the town of Albert until the 9th when the unit had been ordered on a route-march in stages to a Rest Area in the proximity of the community of Bonneville.

There at Bonneville for three days, it had then been ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)*. The unit would encamp there on the 18th, three days after the Canadian general offensive of September 15.

It is not recorded how the officers and other ranks felt about this march to nowhere-in-particular and back, but the War Diarist of that time made the following entry: *...A halt was called for a short time at Warloy, and another longer halt was called for at a point not far from Senlis. These rests however were not appreciated much as it was too wet to sit down, the men were wet through and very weary, with standing with their heavy packs*, although they sang and whistled throughout the march**. ...The only member of the Battalion that seemed to thoroughly enjoy the hill climbing expedition was the Regimental Goat Pet (the Pipers Goat).*

**Perhaps the officers and troops were wearing the kilts that they had worn until the beginning of September when they had been allowed to wear shorts if they wished; it must be remembered that a single kilt is made from fifteen yards of woollen cloth – heavy when dry: extremely heavy when wet.*

***Apparently they were accompanied on the march not only by the pipers' goat, but by the pipers themselves, the pipe band marching second in line behind the Headquarters Detachment.*

Only days later again, the 13th Battalion was to endure a further experience of *the Somme*.

The 13th Battalion had taken over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, there to relieve the 2nd Canadian Battalion near to the village of Courcellette. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit had remained there for only two days before retiring into support once more. It had then been withdrawn into billets in Albert two days later again, on the 27th and further back to Warloy on the morrow.

(Right: *The village of Courcellette seen from the north just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

(Right below: *After the fighting of Courcellette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

Warloy, within hours' marching distance of Albert, was where the Battalion was to be stationed for a week; during that time it would be involved in drills, parades, inspections, a bath for everyone in the unit, church, lectures, musketry and replacing worn equipment and clothing. At the end of those seven days it had made the return march once more to Albert and then, on the 6th, had continued on to the camp at *Brickfields*.

The Battalion was now to be prepared for the upcoming offensive action to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps in conjunction with the British 3rd Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the objective of the 13th Battalion would be a German defensive position known as *Regina Trench*.

Unfortunately it appears that the appropriate page of the 13th Battalion War Diary is missing. However, the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade offers *some* information, albeit less detailed, on the day's happenings.

The attack on the German positions was to be made on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8th.

(Right: *Canadian Army Medical Corps personnel at work in a Regimental First Aid Post in the forward area – from Le Miroir*)

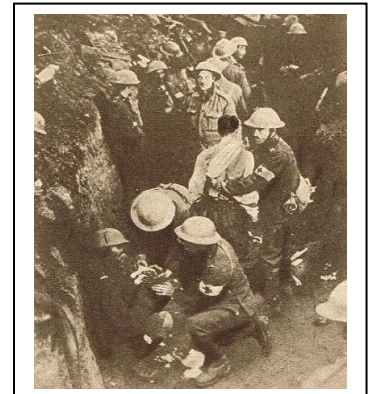
The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War Diary:

7.45 a.m. 13th Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.

9.15 a.m. Message... stating 13th Bn. stopped by German wire.

9.25 a.m. 13th Bn. report situation unchanged.

(continued)



(Preceding page: Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on November 11, 1916 – photograph from 2014)

12.19 p.m. Message... ordering 13th Bn. to hold on to original position (jumping off line) and to try connect up in the evening with the left of the 16th Bn.

5.30 p.m. Message from 13th Bn. timed 2.25 pm. gives position of 13th Bn. Those who got into REGINA Trench were bombed towards the 16th Bn. Remainder were held up by barbed wire and were practically wiped out by M.G. fire.

6.00 p.m. 15th Bn. report at 3.45 p.m. that 13th Bn. called on 3 platoons of the reinforcing company of 15th Bn. and these are being replaced at dusk.

13th Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.

On October 9 the 13th Battalion held on in their former jumping off positions despite... heavy shelling for the greater part of the day... On the night of October 9-10 the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade retired... and the 13th Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.

The Battalion War Diarist was to enter the figure of some three-hundred casualties* for the day of October 8 alone.

***On the entries of days following he also notes imprecise numbers of those originally reported as 'missing' who, by then were reporting to duty with the unit.**

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



On October 11 the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) had begun its march away from the First Battle of the Somme. Passing to the westward the unit was to spend four days in billets in the community of Halloy-les-Pernois.

This was, of course, both when and where Private Kirk was to re-join the 13th Battalion.

* * * * *

On October 4 his unit was on the move again, still on foot. It marched by a northward itinerary, firstly behind the city of Arras and then beyond, until it reached the area of the city and mining-centre of Lens. More precisely, the 13th Battalion found itself relieving the 13th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment in trenches at Cabaret and Souchez. The date was October 27.



(Right above: 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)

(continued)

(Right below: *The village of Souchez already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir*)

The following weeks of autumn and the first ones of the winter were spent by the 13th Battalion in and about Cabaret and Souchez when they were in both the forward and rear areas. There the officers and men once more settled into the grinding, routine existence in – and out of – the trenches.



(Right below: *A detachment of Canadian troops going to a forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

That late autumn of that 1916 – after the *First Battle of the Somme* - and the winter of 1916-1917 was also a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce and to re-organize. There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.



There was of course, the constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers. However, it was to be sickness and, particularly, dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period.

On a more personal level, there are three pertinent entries in Private Kirk's dossier: the first was his promotion to the rank of lance corporal which came about on November 8 while the Battalion was enduring seemingly-endless days of rain in the areas of *Berthonal Wood* and *Cabaret Rouge*.

(Right: *Cabaret Rouge British Cemetery, from where was exhumed Canada's Unknown Soldier – photograph from 2017*)



On December 6, Lance Corporal Kirk began a ten-day leave of absence which terminated when he returned to duty on December 20. The extra days were likely due to a travel allowance which in turn suggests that the leave had been spent in the United Kingdom.

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



Unfortunately it was not to be much more than a single week after his return from furlough that once again a lack of self-discipline landed him in trouble: *When on Active Service Absent from Parade 1.30 pm to 4.00 pm 28/12/16*. On January 5 Lance Corporal Kirk was deprived of his stripe and reduced to the rank of private soldier.

(continued)

On March 4 the 13th Battalion began a two-day march from Ruitz – behind the lines – and, during the night of March 6-7, relieved the Canadian 20th Battalion in support positions near *Maison Blanche*, all in the vicinity of the larger village of Neuville St-Vaast.



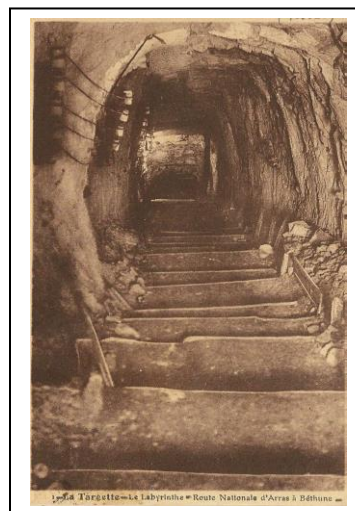
Six days later, on March 12, it was time for another battalion to move into those positions held by the 13th in *support* and for the 13th to take over trenches in the front line.

(Right above: *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*)

During those days spent at *Maison Blanche*, the personnel of the 13th Battalion had apparently not been idle. It must have been apparent to all that there was something big afoot if the number of tasks allotted to – or witnessed by – Private Kirk and also by his peers – and as noted in the War Diary - is evidence to go by:

(Right: *Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth – from a vintage post-card*)

March 9th ... Throughout the day there was a considerable amount of work to be done one way or another. Trench stores etc., had to be checked up, as also had the gas appliances and ammunition... A considerable amount of work had to be done in the way of cleaning up, and reconstructing the weak parts in the dugouts... The Battalion work parties... consisted of the following... working on Vase Tunnel... (another) pushing trucks for Tunnelling Company... cleaning Burn (a small stream)...burying cable from support to Front Line... The list is not exhaustive.



The period in the front lines added other duties similar to those listed above: carrying parties, wiring parties, burial parties and observation of the fall of friendly artillery fire also became part of the routine. Six days later again, on the 18th, the unit retired once more into reserve in the area of Bois-les-Alleux and Mont St-Éloi, avoiding the main roads on the way.



The Battalion was to remain in this area until April 8 when it began to move forward in anticipation of the forthcoming attack.

(Right above and right: *The village of Mont St-Éloi* at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partially destroyed in 1793 and further again during the Great War – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



****Not to be confused with the St-Éloi in Belgium where the Canadians of the 2nd Division had fought in April of 1916 (see further above).***

Through the use of a system of by-then disused French trenches in the area, the Battalion was able to be assembled and to be ready five hours prior to *Zero Hour* and, in doing so, had incurred only two slight casualties.

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 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.

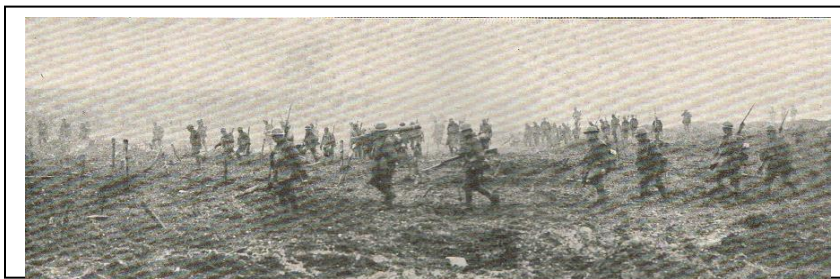


While the British campaign proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood on Vimy Ridge since 1936 – photograph from 2010*)

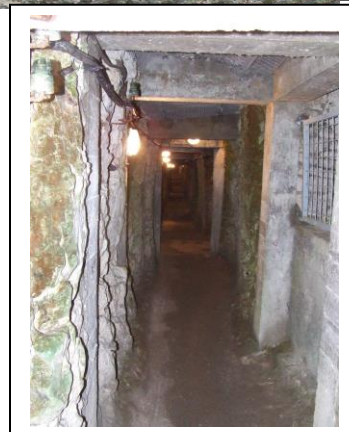
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there were even British troops serving under Canadian command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

(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*)



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

The Battalion War Diarist described the 13th Battalion's role on April 9 thus: *During the Operations of April 9th the Battalion was in Brigade Support, so we were unable to report on many of the incidents which occurred ahead of the Battalion. We maintained communication between the attacking Battalions and Brigade during the whole of the operations, and were more or less a Report Centre. This was owing to the forward Battalions being unable to keep their wires intact.*



(continued)

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 case of the anticipated German counter-attacks – which in fact never really amounted to much.

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.



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

On April 10...the 13th Canadian Battalion continued with the work of consolidating...and extended on the left flank. Burying and Salvage Parties were detailed from each Company, and the clearing of the Battlefield practically completed. We also supplied several Working Parties during the day...These parties were used for road making to enable the Artillery to bring forward their guns... The weather was very bad the whole day... (Excerpts from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for April 10, 1917)

(Right: *The battle-field of Vimy Ridge on April 10, two unidentified fallen in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)



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 were to recover from the initial Canadian success.

On the night of May 4-5, the entire Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade retired from the front to the area of Mont St-Éloi, then on May 6 a further six-and-a-half kilometres to Chateau de la Haie, before a final march to Gouy-Servins, mercifully less than two kilometres distant, where the unit was to remain until the end of the month.

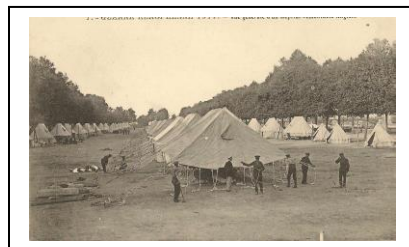


(Right above: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir*)

Private Kirk was now to be afflicted with one of the curses of life in the trenches: scabies. This skin disorder is brought about by mites which burrow into the skin, causing a rash accompanied by a relentless itch. It is a highly contagious condition and the conditions of living in close quarters in the trenches – plus the ever-present lice – ensured that it was a problem during the entire war-time period.

On May 21 he was admitted for treatment into the 12th Canadian Field Ambulance from where, five days afterwards, he was forwarded to the 6th Canadian Casualty Clearing Station at Bruay. From there it was to be yet a further eleven days before he was then discharged back to duty and re-joined his unit.

(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)



The months of June and July were spent much in the routine of front, support and reserve. Towards the latter part of July the Battalion was withdrawn to the area of Noeux-les-Mines and then Aix-Noulette for extra training - the 13th Battalion was to play a major role in the upcoming attack on Hill 70, in the northern outskirts of Lens.

(Right: Canadian soldiers and an officer during the summer of 1917, the photograph showing the conditions under which the Canadians were obliged to work and fight – from Le Miroir or Illustration)



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 *that* area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



(Right above: A further 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)



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

(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.

(Right: The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.)



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 below: *This gentle slope which rises to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands in the right foreground 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, hidden from aerial observation under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)



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

The son of Annie (Mrs. Thomas) Kirk (also found as *Quirk* and *Quick*) – the latter name used on the will in which he bequeathed his all to his mother and to whom he had also, as of October 1, 1914, allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay (*Quirk* found on *these papers*) – of Stellarton, Pictou County, Nova Scotia, he was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 15, 1917, during the fighting at *Hill 70*.



George Patrick Kirk had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty years and five months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, March 17, 1894 (from attestation papers).

Private George Patrick Kirk was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to *criceadam@yahoo.ca*. Last updated – January 23, 2023.