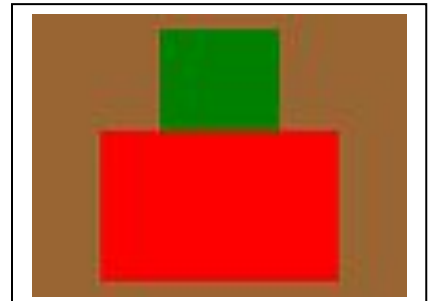




Private Michael Lee (originally spelled as *Leigh*) (Number 470608) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Central Ontario Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, lies in Adanac Military Cemetery, Miraumont: Grave reference VI.E.15..

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Central Ontario)* is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service variously recorded as that of *fisherman, sailor and plumber*, Michael Lee may have been the thirty-five year-old passenger registered on the vessel *Ivermore* on her crossing of the Cabot Strait on October 12 of 1911. The Michl (sic) Lee on board was making the passage from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney, Cape Breton, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, in transit to the industrial city of Sydney, there to seek work as a plumber.

There appears to be no further information a propos Michael Lee from then until September of 1915 when he was in the Kings County, New Brunswick, town of Sussex, there to enlist.

His first pay records show that the twenty-fifth day of that month was the day on which the Canadian Army first remunerated Michael Lee for his services to the 64<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion, by which unit he had been *taken on strength* on that same day. Two days later, on September 27, in Sussex, he underwent a medical examination, the result of which pronounced him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. At the same time he was called upon to attest.

Again on that same date, the formalities of Private Lee's enlistment were brought to an official close when Major Henry Flowers, Second-in-Command of the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion, declared, on paper, that...*M Lee...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

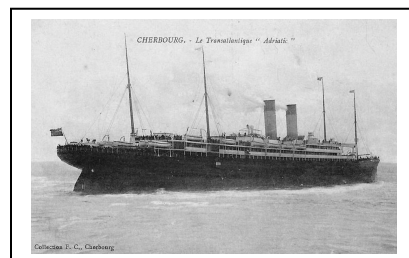
It was at the military complex of *Camp Sussex* that Private Lee was apparently to undergo and then *complete* his training with the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion some six months later. During that time, however, it is certain that he was to return to Halifax, if for nothing else other than medical purposes – although there was seemingly there a training program as well for personnel of the Battalion.

As for the medical incident: Private Lee was admitted on January 11 of 1916 into the Station Hospital in Halifax for treatment to a sprained ankle. He was to remain there for twelve days, until January 23, before being discharged back *to duty*.

After this episode almost ten weeks were then to pass before Private Lee was recorded as having embarked on March 31 of 1916 onto the requisitioned *White Star* liner *Adriatic* in the harbour at Halifax - for passage overseas to the United Kingdom.

(Right below: *The photograph of Adriatic is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The officers and *other ranks* of the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion were not the only military passengers crossing the Atlantic on the vessel: the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry, an unidentified Draft of the Coburg Heavy Battery and the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance – this latter undertaking the ship's medical services during the crossing – were to be Private Lee's fellow travellers, almost twenty-five hundred souls all told.



(continued)

***Adriatic* sailed on April 1, one of a convoy of three troop transports – the other two also ocean-liners now in the service of the King: *Baltic* and *Empress of Britain* – to be escorted by the elderly cruiser HMS *Carnarvon*.**

Private Lee's vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool at three o'clock in the afternoon of April 9. While some of *Adriatic's* passenger-personnel, perhaps the artillery, may have ordered sent elsewhere, the two infantry battalions and the 8<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance immediately left by train for the Canadian military establishment of *Camp Bramshott* – named for the adjacent village of that name - in the southern county of Hampshire.



***(Right above: Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016)***

Only three months after his arrival in the United Kingdom, on July 6, Private Lee was transferred from the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion – both bureaucratically and physically - to the 40<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion, stationed at the time in the Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* in the county of Kent. There, in the subsidiary *Cæsar's Camp*, he and his draft from *Camp Bramshott* were to be readied for despatch across the English Channel to France.

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

His former unit, the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion, having seen most of its personnel dispersed to other battalions, then, on the following day, July 7, ceased to function for a number of months before its resurrection in that December as a reserve battalion until the summer of 1917. It was then definitively disbanded\*.



***\*Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas some two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.***

***However, as it transpired, only fifty or so of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been specifically designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.***

Less than a week after his transfer to the 40<sup>th</sup> Battalion and while still in England, Private Lee once more changed units and was *taken on strength* – on paper – by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Central Ontario*) which was already serving on the Continent.

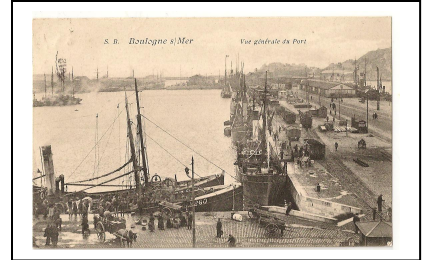
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On the night of July 13-14 of 1916 he crossed the English Channel, as one of a re-enforcement draft, via the nearby port of Folkestone and its French counterpart Boulogne, on the coast opposite.

*(Right: A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from 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)*



By the evening of that July 14, Private Lee had reported to duty to the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the industrial port-city of Le Havre, there to be organized and to await his subsequent orders. He was to languish at Le Havre for three weeks.

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



When those orders came, they were not for him to proceed to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Central Ontario*) but instead, to the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion. This he did on August 4, at a time when the unit, organized only days before, on August 1, was about to be its way to service in Belgium.

On that August 4, the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion arrived at Le Havre from nearby Harfleur – likely having marched – and, in company with recruits from the Canadian Base Depot, boarded a train for the twenty-four hour journey to Abeele, a community just on the French side of the frontier with Belgium.

Three days later the Battalion left Abeele, crossed into Belgium and proceeded to the area of Dickebusch where the unit was now to be based. The following days saw the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion supply numerous work parties for labour and construction work. Those personnel not so occupied were to undergo infantry training.

*\*These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks. They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However they also came to serve as re-enforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.*



*(Right above: Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this also being a job to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned. – from Le Miroir or Illustration)*

Thus it continued until the thirtieth day of the month when Private Lee was one of a draft despatched on August 30 to report to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Central Ontario*) which by this time had moved out of Belgium and was being billeted in Albert, a French provincial town to the south. Albert was in the area of *the Somme* where the disappointing – and at times catastrophic – summer offensive of the same name was being fought.

By the time that Private Lee's draft reached the unit on September 2, its four fighting companies were already serving in the forward area, having relieved an Australian formation, and were in support trenches. The new arrivals likely remained in the rear area – the War Diarist did not record the event – for the next week since it appears that the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not relieved until September 9-10 when it...moved back into trenches on TARA HILL and TARA VALLEY...(see further below).

\* \* \* \* \*

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a component of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian Division\*. The Battalion had been among the first to sail from Canada to the United Kingdom in early October of 1914 and, having then spent some four months in England, in February of 1915 it had landed with the Canadian Division in France at the port of Saint-Nazaire.

*\*Designated as such until the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division when, logically, it became the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division.*

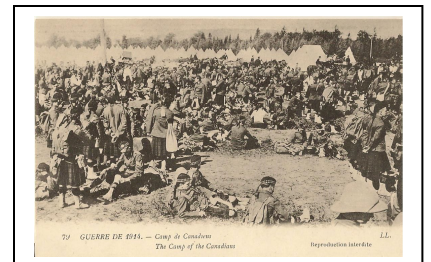
The Battalion had then, only days after its arrival in France, been posted to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier, and had entered the trenches for the first time near the northern French town of Armentières. It had subsequently served in the Fleurbaix Sector just to the south of the border before having been posted to the *Ypres Salient*.



It had been on April 18, at twenty-five minutes past ten in the morning, that the unit – in fact, the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade - was to cross the border into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

(Right above: *British – or perhaps Canadian – forces cross a pontoon bridge on their way to a forward area. This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)

The Brigade crossed the frontier to the west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe where it was then to remain for two days before advancing eastwards to Vlamertinghe for a *further* two days. It was at that moment that the Germans had launched their attack in an effort to take possession of the nearby city of Ypres.



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

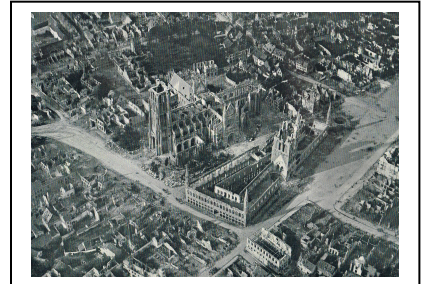
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The newly-arrived units of the Canadian Division had been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for only a short space of time. During these few first days of Canadian tenure *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet. Then the dam had broken - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it.

The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right below: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> *Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Gas was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the 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*)



That cloud had been 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 on the Canadian left at first wavered and then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. At that moment a retreat, not always very cohesive, became necessary while, at the same time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade were moved forward to support the efforts of the French and of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade.

At the time, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been reported as still being at Vlamertinghe, a village to the west of Ypres and at least ten kilometres distant. There was also the city of Ypres to be traversed. The unit began to march towards the fighting at thirty minutes past mid-night on April 23. By the evening of the same day the Battalion War Diarist was recording just over a total of five-hundred casualties over those few hours.

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

By the second day, April 23, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement became necessary.



(continued)

At times there had been breaches 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 began to close the gaps.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued to retreat before digging-in in the area of Wieltje. There it remained until being relieved on the evening of April 25. Retiring through the village of St-Jean, the unit took up positions in reserve trenches on the east bank of the Yser Canal.



There it remained during the night in the company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Canadian Infantry. Early the following morning, April 26, it took up positions on the west bank of the waterway where it remained for the next three days.

*(Right above: The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time 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 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion returned to its billets at Vlamertinghe on April 29. There the unit was greeted by a re-enforcement draft of fifteen officers and five-hundred twenty-three other ranks – losses had been heavy.

The Battalion was to remain for three days at Vlamertinghe after which time it was withdrawn further, to the south-west and across the frontier to Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.

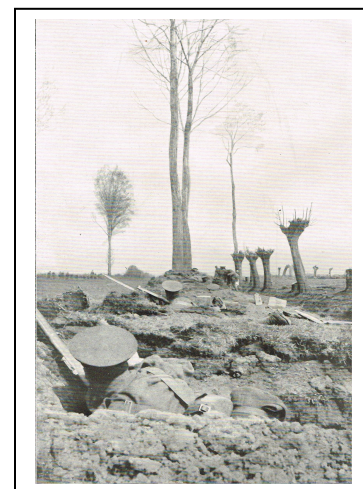


*(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion retired to its western bank – to the left – photograph from 2014)*

At nine o'clock in the evening of May 2 the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion began that withdrawal to Bailleul. There in the vicinity of the town the unit was to spend the next number of days, until the middle of the month.

On or about May 16, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered to move down the line, further into France via St-Floris and Essars, towards the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

*(Right: Troops in hastily-dug trenches at Ypres: It was to be 1916 before any of the belligerent armies equipped its troops with steel helmets. – from Illustration)*



(continued)

There at Festubert, a series of attacks and counter-attacks were to take place in which the British High Command managed to gain 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 – having a lesser number of troops to contribute – would not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless, proportionally, suffered heavily.

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

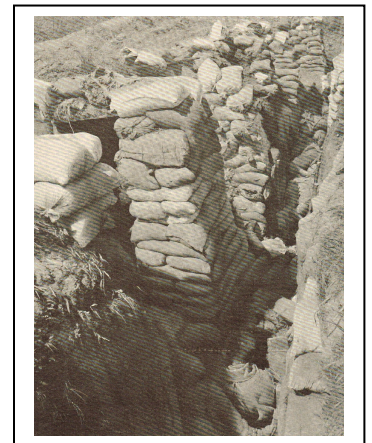
The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.



*\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right above: *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(?)*)

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion entered into the reserve trenches at Festubert on May 22. It was still there three days later, on May 25, when the War Diarist entered the following into his journal: *In reserve trenches at Festubert, heavy shelling all day and night at frequent intervals. Have had all the time considerable trouble to keep up our communications as the shrapnel cuts our wires. The signalling section are doing excellent work...*



(Right above: *German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth which were captured by the French at their pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorette: Over one-hundred thousand French troops became casualties during this campaign in the Artois. – from Illustration*)

Soon afterwards, during the month of June, Canadian troops were fighting not-so-many kilometres to the south, at Givenchy-les-la-Bassée, still in support of the ongoing French campaign. Because the actions were fewer and less ambitious there were fewer casualties, but casualties there were...and they were incurred for the same reasons as at Festubert.

By June 17, the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area of Givenchy\*, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion being among the first to do so.

*\*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 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to march on June 17 to billets in or near to the community of Oblinghem, two kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune. From there on June 25, it began to move towards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert, there the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion would remain – 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: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the later 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

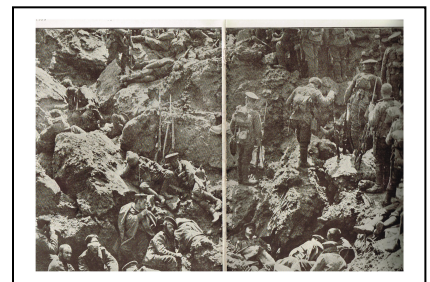


The Canadian Division was to remain in that border area of West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.

For the following number of months, up until June of 1916, on the fronts for which the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian and the lately-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division\* were responsible – including the normally lethal *Ypres Salient* into which both formations were ordered in March and April of 1916 - neither side made any concerted attempt to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches: with one exception\*\*. As with all the other units at the front, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion's time was divided between postings to the front-line trenches, to the support positions, and into reserve (see further below). Casualties were caused mostly by artillery fire\*\*\*, by snipers, and in the occasional infantry action such as the occasional raid on the enemy lines.

*\*The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. It was thereupon stationed in south-west Belgium with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division until such time as all of its infantry units had arrived from the United Kingdom. In March, the Division then took over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of the Ypres Salient.*

*\*\*This episode was the altercation in March and April of 1916 in an area south of the city of Ypres towards the Franco-Belgian frontier. However, the 'Action of the St-Éloi Craters' had at first involved British troops before Canadian battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division played their part – but the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Central Ontario) was a unit of the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division and thus was to play no role whatsoever.*



(Right above: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

***\*\*\*It is estimated that over sixty to seventy per cent of the all the casualties of the Great War were due to artillery-fire.***

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the Ypres Salient which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of Hooze, Railway Dugouts, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Maple Copse and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: Mount Sorrel.



(Right above: *Remnants of Canadian trenches – the iron-work reconstituted - dating from 1915-1916, at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

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



The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences.

But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated and supported, was to prove to be a costly experience for the Canadians.

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



The German attack had primarily been on the part of the front held by the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division but such was its ferocity that units from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions were called upon to help to stabilize the situation.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion had thus been sent forward from the rear area on the afternoon of June 2 to positions in the area of Dickebusch. It moved forward again, not to the forward area but to the vicinity of Chateau Segard on June 3. There it was to remain until June 8, unperturbed by events until sporadically shelled on the two final days of that tour before being relieved. The unit had then retired through the rubble of Dickebusch to Camp 'C' to rest and to prepare for things to come.

Those...*things to come*...commenced during the morning and afternoon of June 12 when the. ...*units were at the disposal of their unit commanders for the purpose of organizing & equipping men for the attack.*

(continued)

***Bn. moved off commencing with C.Coy. at 6.15 remaining coys. and details followed at 15 minutes intervals. Bn. reported all settled in assembly trenches at 12.10 A.M. 13<sup>th</sup> June ready to support 13 & 16<sup>th</sup> Can. Bns. (Excerpts from 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 12, 1916)***

The opening bombardment for what was to prove to be the final attack of the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* opened at fifteen minutes to one o'clock on the morning of June 13 with the first infantry advance coming forty minutes later. The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, however, was not in the opening wave of the assault but rather was in support of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade.

Despite the reported incessant enemy shelling – the mud for once apparently playing a positive role in absorbing much of the destructive force of many of the missiles – the Canadian attack was a success and the Germans were forced out of the positions that they had overrun eleven days previously during the first hours of their attack. Both sides were by now – apart for a small German gain in the area of *Hooze* – back where they had started on June 2.

It was status quo - and the cemeteries of both sides were now a little larger.

Some of the dead from that ultimate attack were of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion: twenty-three killed in action and one-hundred twenty-five wounded ...*practically* – so reports the War Diarist – *all from shellfire*.

(Right: *Almost a century after the events, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60\* to the south-east of Ypres: It is an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014*)



*\*It was apparently much more of a hill before June of 1917 when a British mine blew off its summit on the opening day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge.*

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



June 14 was another day of heavy shelling, but the expected counter-attacks did not amount to much and were beaten off. Gradually, with each passing day, the Battalion War Diarist was able to begin to turn his attentions to such things as feet, church parades and baths.

The remainder of June, then July and August were relatively quiet in *the Salient*, the Canadians being subjected only to what had by then become the routines, rigours – and perils - of trench warfare\*.

(continued)

*\*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 later, by that time having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)*

But things were happening elsewhere on the *Western Front* and by the middle of August the Canadians of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion were in training in anticipation of a move southward into France, and to the area of *the Somme*. By the end of the month the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Brigade had already arrived there and by August 31<sup>st</sup> its troops were relieving the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade and 46<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the front-line trenches facing Bapaume.



*(Right above: The Somme as it still flows today to the east of Amiens towards that city and westward to the sea – photograph from 2009)*

It was there, in the rear area of *Mouquet Farm*, that Private Lee's re-enforcement draft from the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion in Belgium was to report *to duty* with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion on September 2, 1916.

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

(continued)

(Right below: *Beaumont-Hamel - looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which today stands atop part of the German front-line defences: The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009*)

As the battle had progressed, 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 collective offensive contribution was to be on September 15 in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



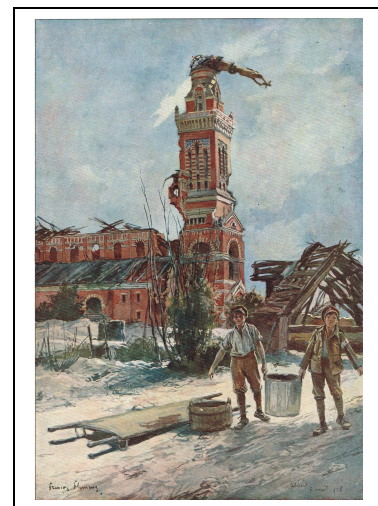
(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

For the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion the first taste of the front lines at *the Somme* was to last for five days – from September 4, when it had moved up from the support area to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, until September 9 when it in turn was relieved to withdraw to Albert, the large provincial town nearby and to *Brickfields Camp* in close proximity. There had been no infantry action undertaken by Private Lee's unit on that first tour, but the enemy artillery had been particularly horrendous.



As of September 11, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Central Ontario*) began to march. It was not to be involved in the upcoming offensive which was planned for four days hence, thus it had likely been ordered on its way to free up billets for those incoming troops who were. Private Lee therefore marched for six days until September 17 when his unit returned to Albert. It remained there and at the nearby *Brickfields Camp* but for a single day, until September 18.

The offensive had run its costly course by that time and the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to move up to relieve other Canadian units in the trenches. It was at first warmly received by the German guns and then, on the morrow, by enemy infantry who attacked in force but who were repulsed. Two days later again, on September 21, the unit was withdrawn into Brigade Support.



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

A second prolonged route march was now in the offing for Private Lee and the other personnel of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Setting out on September 25, it followed much the itinerary of the previous trek of two weeks before – Warloy, Val de Maison, Halloy – where the unit spent five days undergoing instruction and training - Val de Maison, Contay, Albert and finally *Tara Valley Camp* where it bivouacked on October 5.

In its absence, a further two offensives had gone ahead: the *Battle of Morval* of September 25 to 28 which did not involve any Canadian formations; and the *Battle of Thiepval* of September 26 to 28 in which certain units of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisions had fought.



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

And by the time of the return of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion to the area of Albert, there had begun the still-ongoing *Battle of Le Transloy*\*, in which the entire Canadian Corps of four divisions was acting as the Reserve Army.

*\*During which the Newfoundland Regiment was to fight at Guedecourt on October 12.*

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was still in its quarters at *Tara Valley Camp* on October 7 when its personnel was ordered to prepare for battle.

(Excerpt from 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for October 7, 1916) *The following issued to men:- (1) 170 Rounds (50 extra) S.A.A. (Small Arms Ammunition) to each man except Battalion Bombers (2) 4 Mills Grenades and 3 Sandbags tied to belt (3) 2 Days rations in addition to Iron-rations.*

*Each company carried:- (1) 1 Man per section, 12 bombs in sandbags (2) 3 Very Pistols and 48 Very lights (white) (3) 12 Very lights (Green) for C & D Companies (4) 12 Very lights (Red) for A & B Companies (5) 2 Sets of S.O.S. rockets (6) 9 Ground Flares (Red) for signalling to contact aeroplanes.*

*Battalion left position at 6.30 p.m. and relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion in the trenches. Relief complete 12 midnight.*



The Battalion was reported as having attacked the German trenches at ten minutes to five in the morning. ...1<sup>st</sup> *Objective gained, but battalion was driven back to assembly trenches by enemy counter attack at 1. 45 p.m.* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for October 8, 1916) The War Diary Appendix a propos the operation cites a lack of ammunition and grenades as being a prime reason for the failure.

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

After then having spent a heavily-shelled night in what had been the assembly trenches of the day before, on October 9 the Battalion was relieved and retired to Albert.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Regina Trench Cemetery – Regina Trench was adjacent to Kenora Trench, another daunting German strong-point – and some of the ground on which the Canadians fought during that autumn of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

On the morrow, the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade began the long march away from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

But Private Lee was not to march with it.

According to the War Diary report for October 8, all four Companies of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been directly engaged in the fighting of the day and no mention was entered of any other duties being performed by Battalion personnel. However, the casualty report *a propos* Private Lee reads as follows:

**8-10-16 “Previously reported Missing, now Killed in Action.”**

***He was killed while on duty as a stretcher bearer during the attack on Regina Trench, Courcellette. No further information as to the actual circumstances under which he met his death is available.***



(Right above: *Stretcher bearers accompanying the infantry out of the trenches: These men, often infantry-men ordered to the task, shared all the perils of the battle-field with those who carried rifles – and often for longer periods. This photograph was apparently taken during the First Battle of the Somme. – from Illustration*)

The son of Thomas Lee\*, former fisherman (deceased June 22, 1920) – to whom as of April 26, 1916, he had willed his all - and of Ellen Lee (née *Hyde*) of Witless Bay South-side (by 1921, North-side), Newfoundland, he was also brother to Mary-Jane, to Lucy-Anne, to Thomas Joseph\*\* and to Arthur.

***\*‘Leigh’ is transformed to ‘Lee’ in the Witless Bay Parish Records between 1875 and 1877 – as also is the name ‘Teigh’ to ‘Tee’.***

***\*\*Private Thomas Joseph Lee (Number 100523) of the 49<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion, at first reported as missing in action, is today recorded as having been killed in action on October 8, 1916, the same day as his brother. Having no known last resting-place, he is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.***

At first having been reported on October 8, 1916, as *missing in action*, it was not until on or about March 22 of the following year that Private Lee was officially recorded as having been *killed in action* and the amendment made to his file. The reason for the change is not cited in his dossier but it may have been at about this time that his remains were discovered and identified before burial.

(continued)

The 1921 Census records that Ellen Lee (by that time widowed) was living at Witless Bay in the company of Thomas and of Ellen – born in 1904 and 1908 respectively in Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia - documented as her nephew and niece. This is likely the Thomas – in fact the son of Michael – to whom he (Private Michael Lee) had, as of April 1, 1916, allotted a monthly eighteen dollars from his pay.

Private Michael Lee had also arranged monthly separation payments as of 1915 for his mother Ellen who is described on the appropriate forms as...*Guardian 3 children*. (Eight year-old James Lee of Witless Bay is recorded as having passed away in 1918 – was he the third child?)

Finally, while on his attestation papers he is declared as not to been married, another official source cites...*Wife pre-deceased soldier*. There appears to be no further available information from other sources.

Michael Lee had enlisted at the apparent age of both forty-two years and two months (attestation papers) and twenty-eight years (first medical report). Neither of these figures is compatible with the date of birth recorded on his attestation papers, July 30, 1877, or the one to be found in the Witless Bay Roman Catholic Parish Records, July 30, 1875.

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

