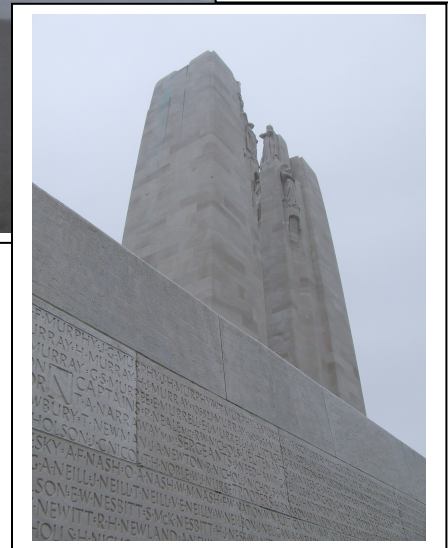


Private



Edgar Leslie MacKay (Number 208444) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is honoured in the stone of the Vimy Memorial.



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a sailor, Edgar Leslie MacKay appears to have left little if any information behind him a propos his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with certainty is that he was present in the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton, during the month of October, 1915, for that is where and when he enlisted.

*(Right: The image of the cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from Wikipedia.)*

Edgar Leslie MacKay presented himself in the capital of Cape Breton on October 6 of 1915, to be examined medically, to enlist, and to undergo attestation all on that same day. Although this is not confirmed, it was likely also at this time that he was *taken on strength*

by 'D' Company of the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*), and allotted the unit number 222769 – still recognized by *Archives Canada* although the name is spelled as McKay.

The official conclusion to the formalities of Private MacKay's enlistment came on the same October 6 when the Officer Commanding the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private MacKay within days would then have found himself transported to the Citadel in Halifax where the entire Battalion was mobilized on October 14. However, for the remaining months of the autumn of 1915, and then for the winter and early spring of the following year, he would have found himself *outside* the Citadel, he and his Company encamped on the adjacent common with 'B' and 'C' Companies, 'A' Company having been the only one to find accommodation inside the fortress.

The military authorities during this time were busy making plans for the establishment of a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade; apart from the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Brigade was to comprise the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*), as well as the 193<sup>rd</sup> and 219<sup>th</sup> Battalions. The Brigade was officially mobilized at Camp Aldershot on May 23, there to pass the summer training as a unit, then receiving its colours in September before embarkation, on October 11, onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, for passage to the United Kingdom.

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

But when *Olympic* sailed two days later, on October 13, there was no Private MacKay on board\*. Apparently unbeknownst to his immediate superiors, he had been transferred to the 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion during the month of September – one source says as late as the 18<sup>th</sup>, the day of embarkation - and by the time that the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion sailed, he was already in England.



*\*On a similar, in fact almost identical, occasion, the private in question was recorded as being a deserter, although the error was eventually recognized. This charge does not appear in Private MacKay's files.*

The 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun organizing at the Exhibition Camp just outside Toronto in January of 1916, although how much training was undergone at that time is not documented. However, by the end of June it had apparently been advanced enough for the unit to be transported to Camp Aldershot for further exercises. Ten weeks later – by this time with Private MacKay among its numbers – it was to take ship in the harbour at Halifax.

The ship was to be the same one as later travelled on by Private MacKay's former unit. HM Transport *Olympic* – sister ship to *Britannic*, to be sunk in November of that 1916, and to the ill-fated *Titanic* – was one of the largest ships afloat at the time as was evident from

the units that boarded her: apart from Private MacKay's 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion there were the 100<sup>th</sup>, 107<sup>th</sup>, 108<sup>th</sup> and 144<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry; the 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery Staff as well as the 50<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup>, 52<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Field Artillery Batteries and the Brigade Ammunition Column; and the 6<sup>th</sup> Siege Battery of the Canadian Garrison Artillery.

Military personnel alone travelling on board her would have numbered some six-thousand.

The 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked on September 18: *Olympic* sailed on the morrow. Six days later, she tied up at Princess Wharf in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool. If the date in his files is the correct one, September 20, it was during the trans-Atlantic crossing that Private MacKay was re-attested – his occupation now that of a clerk - the proceedings overseen by the Officer Commanding the 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel W.L. Jolly.

It was at this point that Private MacKay was assigned a different number: 208444.

Apparently, according to a single internet source – *97<sup>th</sup> Bn. The Lost Legion – American Volunteers for the CEF* – petty politics now played a role in the posting of the unit which, perhaps immediately, or at least by October 15, the day of another medical examination, found itself languishing at the camp in Otterbury, the place often employed as a quarantine camp for those arriving from Canada.

The 97<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to proceed to the front but – as was the case with many other Canadian battalions, including three of the four of the Nova Scotia Highland Brigade – was to be used as a re-enforcement pool.

On October 31, Private MacKay was ordered to report to the combined depot of the Royal Canadian Regiment and Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in the vicinity of the south-coast town of Seaford.



(Right: *The mortuary chapel and a part of the military plot in Seaford Cemetery in which are buried two Newfoundlanders – photograph from 2016*)

Four weeks later he was on his way to France as one of a re-enforcement draft. Having sailed on November 29, possibly through the port of Southampton, the detachment reported on the following day, November 30, to the Canadian Base Depot established by that time in the area of the French industrial city of Le Havre, on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

(continued)

It was to the Base Depot at Le Havre that troops reported from England – or upon their release from hospitalization in France – to be despatched to their respective units *in the field* when the time was suitable. Apparently Private MacKay's draft of November 30 was a

part of the largest arrival ever at the Base Depot up until that date – four thousand three hundred thirteen.

Twelve days later he was one of a further draft, on this occasion – according to his own papers – sent to report to the its new unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion\*. Such a transfer was usually completed within a day or so, but in this case the same papers report him reporting *to duty* as late as February 18.

*\*While still using the designation Regiment, a unit which might comprise any number of battalions, the RCR only ever fielded a single battalion for active service. The same can be said for the (Royal) Newfoundland Regiment.*

There is an obvious disparity in the two dates recorded, the answer to which seems at least partly to be documented in the RCR Battalion War Diary entry of February 18: *112 O.R. joined from Training Battalion*. Some Brigades apparently had training facilities on the Continent to where new arrivals deemed to be unprepared could be sent. If, on the other hand, the Training Battalion referred to was the one at Seaford, that still leaves a void of some ten weeks to account for. Perhaps an entrenching battalion\*...although it is unusual that such a posting would not be found in the records.

*\*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*)

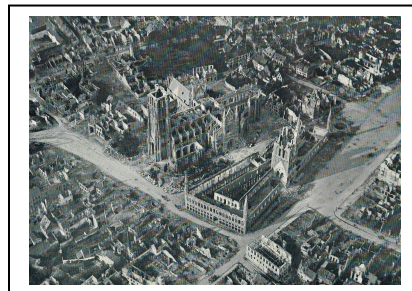
\* \* \* \* \*

The Royal Canadian Regiment, although being the senior regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of *the Great War*, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas to the United Kingdom. In fact, it *had* been sent overseas, but in a different direction, to languish for a year on the British island possession of Bermuda.

After that posting the RCR had been brought home to Canada in the summer of 1915 and had then likely taken the same ship on to the United Kingdom where it had then been attached to the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the newly-forming 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division. The RCR had then been transferred with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division to the Continent on November 1 of 1915, and immediately sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area and then, at the end of March of 1916, to the *Ypres Salient*.

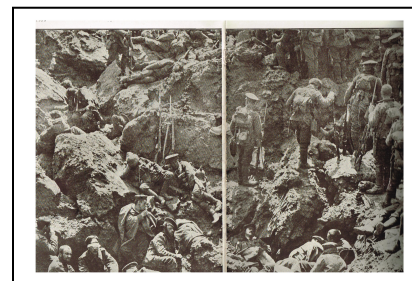
(Right below: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)*

The first months of 1916 had been relatively peaceful for the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, also in the frontier area. It was towards the end of the month of March, 1916, that the entire Division was transferred to the *Ypres Salient*, a lethal place at the best of times, in an area to the south-east and in the vicinity of such places as the village of Hooze, and those that now went by English names such as *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and *Mount Sorrel*.



In April it was the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, in a neighbouring sector to the south of Ypres, which was to receive the attention of the German Army for a few days. This period was not to be as tranquil as that being experienced during the same period by the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi 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 series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. They followed up with an infantry assault, the presumed success of which was to be consolidated by the Canadians.



(Right above: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration)*

After a brief initial success the attack soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were relieving the by-then exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had the British, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Division affair and the personnel of the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery some kilometres away.

Its *own* first major action, some seven weeks later, was to be the confrontation with the Germans at *Mount Sorrel*, in the south-east area of the Ypres Salient.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British (and thus also Canadian) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, in the areas of the village of Hooze and those other places of English-sounding names as listed in a closely-previous paragraph. They are still referred to by the local people as such today.

**(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)**

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

The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was a costly disaster for the Canadians.

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

Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started eleven days before – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.

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

The Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had been caught in the maelstrom of June 2 and had remained in the forward area until the night of June 5-6 when it had been relieved and had retired to Camp “B” well to the rear. The unit was not to serve again during the action at *Mount Sorrel* where it had by then incurred some one-hundred forty-five casualties.

Thus it was back to the everyday routines of trench warfare for some two months at which time the Battalion – as was to be the case of most of the other Canadian Battalions – was once more withdrawn, on this occasion for training in ‘*open warfare*’. The Canadians were about to travel south into France to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

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

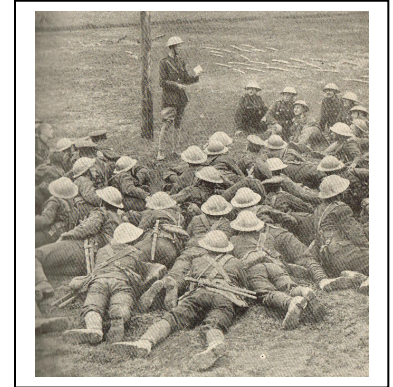
**(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)**

(continued)



On that first day of *1<sup>st</sup> Somme*, 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 day on the field at Beaumont-Hamel.

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and 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, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)

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

The RCR arrived in the area of the provincial town of Albert in the late evening of September 13 and just two days later, on September 15, was ordered to move forward in order to attack a German strong-point, the *Zollern Graben*, on the following day. By four o'clock in the morning of September 17, when it withdrew, the RCR had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties and the *Zollern Graben* was still in German hands.



Another major action was to follow: the attack of October 8-9 on the *Regina Trench* system was not a success but, on the contrary, an expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 11. By that time the RCR was to be in the Lens sector, some fifty kilometres to the north. In fact, the unit was to be moving in that direction within days of having fought at *Regina Trench*.

(Right below: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the surrounding area, ground which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

During the five weeks of its sojourn at *the Somme* the Battalion had lost, *killed* and *wounded*, about four-hundred fifty *all ranks*. Over two hundred more had been reported as *missing in action*, the War Diarist optimistically predicting that most of them would be later found in field ambulances and casualty clearing stations. The accuracy of that prediction does not appear to be documented.



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



The RCR Battalion began to withdraw from *the Somme* on October 10. The Battalion War Diarist makes no mention of any motor transport or train being employed so it may be assumed that the unit, as did many others, retired on foot. The route took it westward at first, then to turn northward so as to pass west of the by-now battered city of Arras and beyond.

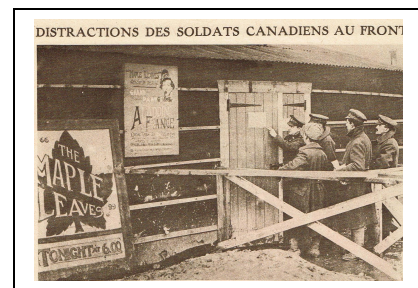
(Right: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



It was on the 24<sup>th</sup> of that October of 1916 that the Battalion arrived in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector to the north-west of Arras. The War Diarist on that date has reported Battalion strength as being three-hundred eighty-six all ranks, less than forty per cent of regulation battalion numbers. *The Somme* had taken its toll.

The RCR, in its new quarters in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector, once more began the daily pattern of life in and out of the trenches\*, a routine which lasted until the middle of February of the following year, 1917.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers while off-duty perusing the program of an upcoming concert ‘somewhere on the Continent’ – from Le Miroir*)



*\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



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

(Right above: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with steel helmets and British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration*)



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

The Battalion War Diary of this period is repetitive in its entries: much as described above and most casualties due to German artillery and snipers.

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

Then in February the unit was ordered into Divisional Reserve at Bruay where it began five weeks of training for the upcoming British offensive; not that it was all work: the War Diary reports sports events and concerts among the litany of parades, lectures, marches, drills, work-parties and visits from military and political personages.



(Right: *A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many tasks allocated to troops when they were not manning the front lines – from Le Miroir*)



It was to the vicinity of the community of Bruay that Private MacKay’s re-enforcement draft reported to duty on February 18 of 1917.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was to be a full month after Private MacKay’s arrival that on March 21 the RCR moved forward into the trenches once again; after five weeks in reserve perhaps the change was more than a bit of a shock to the Battalion’s collective system: the War Diarist notes that the new quarters... *LA MOTTE Camp, is composed of Bivouacs, with nine tents for officers. We are its first occupants. It can be greatly improved.*

But he also notes that... *“C” Company relieved the right Company of the 58<sup>th</sup> Battn. taking over the exact frontage from which we are expected to jump off.* Such an observation illustrates the recent policy of informing junior officers and senior NCOs of the plans of intended actions, knowledge that these personnel were to pass down to the men under their command.

And it must have been clear to the men of the RCR that there *were* intended actions; the forward and rear areas in the Neuville St-Vaast were hives of ongoing activity for which the unit supplied working-parties and carrying-parties each day: dumping areas were being cleared, bivouacs were being sand-bagged, stone laid for walks, new trenches dug and old ones deepened, troops familiarized with the newly-excavated tunnels and other positions, water-pipes and communication lines buried, artillery and machine-guns sited...

On April 1 the RCR Battalion retired to Villers-au-Bois for a week, there to organize for the first day of the offensive. On April 7, the first of the Companies moved into one of those tunnels which had been hewn out of the chalk; it was hoped that these galleries would reduce the number of casualties with the men sheltering there until the last possible moment, and that it would also nurture the element of surprise.

The men of the RCR were to remain underground for well over twenty-four hours.

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

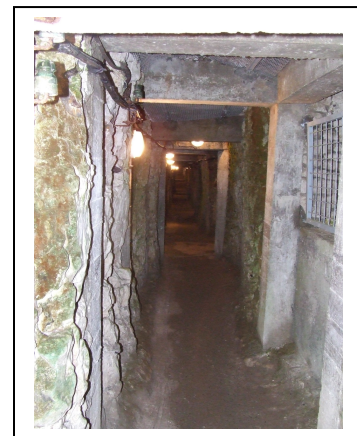


While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, the French offensive was a disaster.

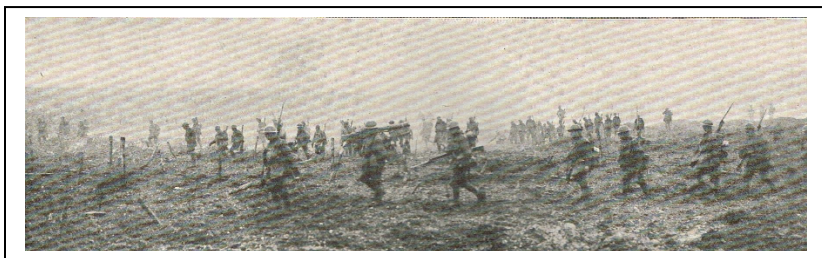
(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single entity, stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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



(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> 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*)



For no reason other than that it is one of the more legible entries to follow, an extract of the experience of “A” Company during the opening of the attack of April 9 is here included as being representative of the events of the assault as undertaken by the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary of April 9, 1917) 3.12 a.m. “A” Company under Captain Munn reports Co. in Assembly trenches.

(continued)

**5.30 a.m. Raining. Barrage opens.**

**While the other three Companies were in communication with Headquarters at a relatively early hour, apparently not so "A" Company, not until... 1.40 p.m. Message from "A" Co. delivered by wounded runner stated that they had captured four machine guns, were in touch with Units on both flanks... and that they had sent a patrol over the Ridge.**

**2.15 p.m. "A" Co. (left Co.) is in its objective. Strength 1 Officer and approximately 50 other ranks with no N.C.O.'s. It is in touch with "C" Co (right) who's (sic) approximate strength is 1 Officer and sixty other ranks... "A" Co. has sent a patrol over the ridge from which as yet no report has been sent. There is a small gap between "A" Co. and the P.P.C.C.L.I. owing to the shortage of men. We command the whole situation at present, but unless reinforcements and supplies of every sort, more especially S.A.A. (small arms ammunition) available, machine Guns, shovels etc., are sent up at first opportunity, it will be difficult to withstand another counter attack.**

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

**It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division – of which the Royal Canadian Regiment was an element - and also the 4<sup>th</sup> Division whose objective had been Vimy Ridge itself, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions having objectives on the right-hand side of the main slope\*.**



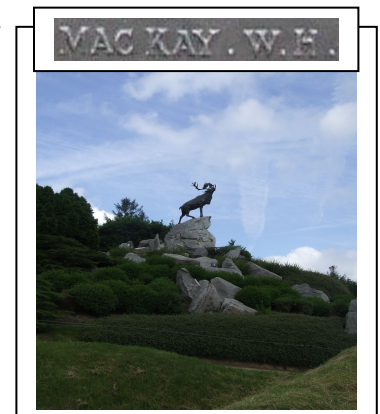
**\*This was the first occasion on which the four Canadian Divisions were to act in concert as an autonomous Canadian Army Corps rather than as a constituent of a British formation. In fact, on this occasion, British forces had been placed under Canadian command.**

**Of the ten thousand Canadian casualties of the day, the Royal Canadian Regiment incurred fifty-six killed in action, one-hundred sixty-five wounded, and sixty-five missing in action.**

**Circumstances of casualty: Whilst acting as a platoon runner during the attack at Vimy Ridge after the objective was reached, and while in Swichenstellen, the captured German trench, he was instantly killed by the explosion of an enemy shell.**

**The son of Herbert H. MacKay, agent for Baird, Gordon and Co. of 183, Water Street, St. John's, General Importers and Exporters – and to whom he had willed his all - and of Mary Ellen MacKay (née Manuel) of Channel, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Hilda-Violet and to Walter H. (both Henry and Hubert are to be found)\***

**\*Private Walter H. Mackay (Number 4105) of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, was reported as having been killed in action during fighting near the Belgian village of Ledeghem on October 2, 1918. Having no known last resting-place, his sacrifice is honoured of the bronze beneath the Caribou at Beaumont-Hamel (see right).**



Edgar Leslie MacKay enlisted at the apparent age of twenty years and eleven months: date of birth at Channel, Newfoundland, November 23, 1894. Other sources have 1895 as the year of birth, but sister Hilda-Violet was born on October 26 of that year.

Private Edgar Leslie MacKay 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 27, 2023.

