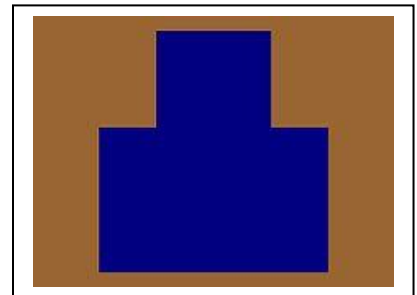




Private Charles Joseph MacPherson (Number 447135) of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Alberta*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Étapes Military Cemetery: Grave reference L.A.26..

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (Alberta) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *stenographer*, Charles Joseph MacPherson appears to have left behind him very little of the history of his early years in the capital city of St. John's, or of his subsequent departure from the then-Dominion of Newfoundland. All that may be said with any certainty is that by June of 1915 he was present in the Canadian city of Calgary, Alberta, for it was then and there that he enlisted.

June 10 of that 1915 was to be a busy date for Charles Joseph MacPherson: His first pay records show that it was then that he enlisted, this being the date on which, according to his first pay records, the Canadian military began to remunerate him for his services. Also on that day he presented himself for a medical examination, a procedure which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force*...and he was also attested, his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace.

That same June 10 then saw the formalities of his enlistment finalized when Lieutenant Colonel William Armstrong, Commanding Officer of the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion – by which unit he was to be *taken on strength* – declared – on paper – that...*Charles J. M Pherson* (sic)...*Having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

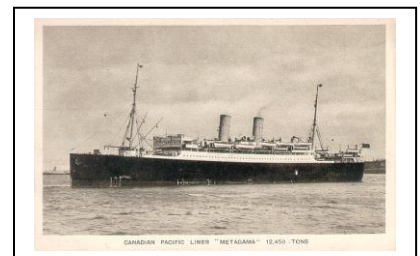
After his enlistment it was likely that Private MacPherson was ordered to the military complex of *Sarcee Camp* to the west of Calgary. Not only was this the only such establishment – the grounds leased from First Nation peoples - in the province of Alberta, but it was also to accommodate units from other areas of Western Canada as well. Private MacPherson's Battalion would be one of several availing of the facilities at the time.

The term *Reinforcing Draft* at times creates some confusion, particularly on those not-infrequent occasions when the draft was to leave for *overseas service* before the parent unit. Such was the case with the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion: the 1<sup>st</sup> Reinforcing Draft sailed from Montreal on July 5, 1915; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reinforcing Draft on September 11 of that year; but the remainder of the unit did not sail from Halifax until March 20 of the year following, 1916. In fact, the two drafts of 1915 were despatched overseas to re-enforce, not the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion, but other Canadian units already serving in the United Kingdom and on the Continent.

Private MacPherson was to be a soldier of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reinforcing Draft and travelled to Montreal in early September, some three months after his enlistment. His training was thus likely incomplete at the time as the regulations prescribed a period of fourteen weeks.

Nevertheless, fully trained or otherwise, the five officers and two-hundred fifty *other ranks* of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reinforcing Draft of the 56<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Calgary Highlanders*), embarked onto the SS *Metagama*\* in the harbour at Montreal on September 11, 1915.

*\*Metagama was not to be requisitioned as a troop-transport during the Great War, and the vessel continued to ply her commercial routes for the Canadian Pacific Steamships Ocean Services Company. However, when space was available and the dates of sailing were convenient, Canadian troops oft-times took passage on her for the trans-Atlantic crossing.*



(continued)

(Preceding page: *The image of Metagama is from the ‘Metagama – Great Ships’ web-site.*)

Private MacPherson’s unit was not to travel alone on *Metagama*; apart from her civilian passengers there were also three other contingents of Canadian military personnel on board: a draft of the 61<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion; and also the 1<sup>st</sup> Drafts of the 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> Battalions.

The ship having subsequently sailed later on that same September 11, Private MacPherson and his comrades-in-arms were then to spend the next ten days at sea. After an apparently uneventful voyage, *Metagama* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on September 21\*.

*\*A second source records the port of arrival as having been Devonport.*

From dockside at Liverpool – or Devonport – Private Macpherson’s unit was transported by train to the large Canadian complex of *Shorncliffe*, situated in the county of Kent and on the Dover Straits in close proximity to the harbour and town of Folkestone. And it was there upon its arrival, on September 22, that his entire draft was attached to the Canadian 9<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion, Private MacPherson to be attached to “C” Company.



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

One week later he was to find himself admitted into the *Moore Barracks* Canadian Military Hospital for a period of six days, having been diagnosed as suffering from bronchitis and *La Grippe* (influenza). There was then to be an unexplained period of three days before he was next forwarded to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at *Woodcote Park*, Epsom, in the southern extremes of the county of Surrey where a further twenty days were to pass.



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

Less than two months following, Private MacPherson was to return for further medical attention to the *Moore Barracks* Hospital; on this occasion it was for a second bout of bronchitis. Having been admitted on December 16, he was to remain there for eleven days, until December 27, before his discharge back *to duty*.

Private MacPherson was now to spend the next thirty-eight days at *Shorncliffe* where he would more than complete those required fourteen weeks of training. On February 3 of 1917 he was transferred on paper to the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Alberta*) and by ship to France, likely on the night of February 3-4 via Folkestone and Boulogne on the French coast opposite.

Thereafter he was surely to travel southwards down the coast by train, to the Canadian Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp*, this encampment in the vicinity of the French industrial city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the *River Seine*.

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

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

Whereas his own papers document him as having reported to the Base Depot on February 3, the War Diary of the Depot itself cites February 4 as the date on which a detachment of four officers and three-hundred seventy-one *other ranks* arrived from *Shorncliffe*.

Whatever the case, it was to be only a matter of days before he was on his way again, despatched from Le Havre on February 15 to report to his new unit, the aforementioned 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion, in the field. On that day Private MacPherson was one of a total of eight-hundred ninety-two *other ranks* to be ordered to various units.

He did so two days later, on February 17, 1916.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Alberta*) was an element of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division which also had crossed from Folkestone to Boulogne, but in mid-September of that 1915, less than five months before Private MacPherson.

Whereas Private MacPherson had thereupon reported to the Canadian Base Depot near Le Havre, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had moved almost immediately from Boulogne where it had disembarked in the late evening of September 18, having then moved eastward before turning north towards the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

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

By the evening of the following day the unit had been in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier. A week later it had been posted to the area of Kemmel where it was now to remain to serve for the next eleven months.

(continued)



**(Right below: *Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery, established as early as 1914, wherein lie over eleven-hundred dead of the Great War – photograph from 2014*)**

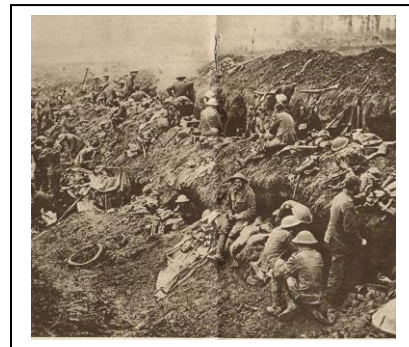
On October 1 a Private Nuttall was to become the Battalion's first casualty on the *Western Front...shot through with rifle in trenches* - accidentally. However, from that time on there was to be a steady number of injuries, interspersed with fatalities, these incurred due to enemy action. Nor was sickness unusual: working-parties would be sent out almost daily and had often returned soaking wet with no possibility of drying out – trenches were of course unheated, but so were their billets and huts.



And because the Canadian-made boots were of such poor quality, the collective feet of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion were to suffer in all manner of ways – to which was to be added the habitual trench-foot.

Thus the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be introduced to the routines, rigours – and perils – of life in - and out of – the trenches. It was a grinding existence – perhaps even monotonous – which was to last into the spring of the following year.

***\*\*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 the year, 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and also the less-evident British-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration*)**

It was into these conditions that a draft of re-enforcements marched on February 16, 1916, from the Base Depot at Le Havre, Private MacPherson among that number\*



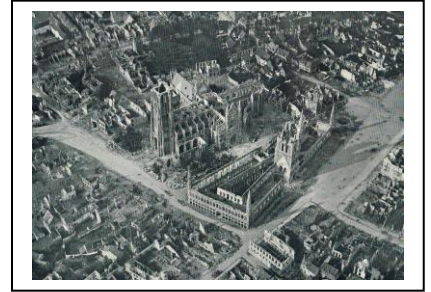
***\*This is the date recorded in the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary even though Private MacPherson's own dossier cites February 17.***

**(Right: *Ground on which the Canadians fought in Belgium in 1915: flat and often wet and muddy – photograph from 2014*)**

**(continued)**

\* \* \* \* \*

Beginning some six weeks after the arrival *to duty* of the forty-man draft to the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion, there was to be fought, some five kilometres to the south down the line from the already-battered medieval city of Ypres, the time officially from March 27 up until the third week in April, the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*; this would primarily involve British and then Canadian troops, troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division – not to forget, of course, that there was also the participation of the *German Army*.

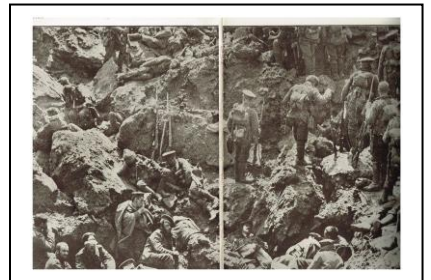


(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was to be little left standing. – from Illustration*)

This would be the first major infantry action for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's units. For troops eager to prove themselves in battle, St-Éloi was to prove a bitter experience.

The confrontation had begun on that March 27 when the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had then pursued the explosions with an infantry attack. The role of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to have been to follow up in turn, some days later, the presumed British success, to hold and to consolidate all the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence was to greet the newcomers who had begun to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines, possibly in the Area of St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

On the first two days of this confrontation the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diarist was to record very little activity on his unit's front. By the last of the month the Battalion had withdrawn back into the area of the Divisional Reserve. But *this* was to be a respite which was to last only some three days; by nine o'clock on the evening of April 3, Private MacPherson and his fellows of the Battalion had been ordered to move up to be posted in the front line in the *St. Éloi sub-Sector*.

Those responsible for the Battalion were apparently expecting that the unit's personnel would encounter wet conditions and thus, on that April 3, issued rubber boots. But, perhaps of greater import, on the same date the authorities were also to distribute for the first time those familiar steel helmets; up until this time, for the first twenty months or so of the Great War, the troops had been fighting with no protection to the head\*.

***\*This was not unique to the British and Empire (Commonwealth) forces; both the French and the Germans would issue helmets to their troops at about this same period.***

In these, the early days of the *Great War* – at least as far as the troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division were to be concerned – there was still a great deal to be learned: “Expect nothing and you will never be disappointed,” said Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*. The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be relieved on April 6, an event which was not to come about until almost mid-night two days later, on the night of April 8-9; but of course, food and water had been readied for only those first three days. And during this two-day prolongation the German artillery, also unexpectedly, had heavily bombarded the entire area for some thirty hours – it also rained for much of the time to add to the misery.

Casualties for that five-day period were the heaviest that the Battalion had incurred up until that date: twenty-nine *killed in action*; one-hundred forty-seven *wounded*; and four reported as *missing in action*.

Having retired to the area of Voormezele and nearby Dickebusch, Private MacPherson’s unit was to move up into support positions on a further single occasion before the official end of the affair. It had also been ordered to carry out a further attack on April 20 in co-operation with the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion but, having seen the by-then exhausted condition of the troops, wiser heads had prevailed and the operation had been cancelled.



Thus for the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion passed the *Action of the St. Éloi Craters*. For the next number of weeks the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion and the other units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division were to remain in the same areas, but there was to be little infantry activity apart from the daily patrolling and wiring. Nevertheless the enemy artillery would be ever-present, on occasion heavy, and causing more than just the occasional casualty.

(Right above: *Voormezele Enclosures No. 1 and No.2 within the bounds of which lie a number of Canadian and British dead from the time of the engagement at St-Éloi – photograph from 2014*)

Towards the end of the month of April, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, there was to be a change in Private MacPherson’s routine: he was seconded from his 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion to a 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade Cable-Party. One may presume that his duties were mainly to include the laying of communications wires and also the frequently-necessary repairs of this fragile and vulnerable materiel; however there is nothing other than the date of his secondment and then of his return to his unit, June 16 – just after *Mount Sorrel* (see immediately below) - documented among his papers.

Some six weeks after having played its role at St-Éloi, in early June, the Battalion was to be involved, during the fighting in the area of the village of *Hooge, Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Railway Dugouts* and *Maple Copse*, in the so-called *Ypres Salient* and just to the south-east of the city of Ypres.

(continued)

The Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division was to be the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division during that time would play a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.

(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, 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*)



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

The confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* was fought from June 2 to 13. The Canadians had apparently been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they were not to subsequently exploit.



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

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack for the following day, an assault intended, at a minimum, to recapture the lost ground.



Badly organized and inadequately supported, the operation was to be a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were not delivered – those that had, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds - the enemy was to remain where he was, in captured Canadian positions, and the Canadians were subsequently left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

Ten days later the Canadians would again counter-attack; on this occasion, the early morning of June 13, they had been better prepared and were to be better supported. The lost ground for the most part was to be recovered, both sides would find themselves back where they had started – except for a small German gain at *Hooge* - and the cemeteries, alas, were now that much fuller.



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



As for Private MacPherson's Battalion during that period, it apparently had been posted in the vicinity of the village of Hooge, one of the more fought-over areas, up until June 1, the day before the German attack, when it had been relieved and had withdrawn into Divisional Reserve at *Camp "H"* in the area of Reninghelst. There it was to receive re-enforcements on that same day and also on the next.

(Right below: *Reninghelst New Military Cemetery wherein lie two-hundred twenty-nine Canadian soldiers, many of whom died during the spring of 1916 – photograph from 2015*)

Earlier on in the day of June 3, the Battalion football team had played a squad from the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion and had won by the only goal of the game. But then it was not long afterwards that news of the German attack on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian positions came through, accompanied by orders to...*"Stand To"*, with instructions to be ready to turn out at half an hour's notice. This order was not rescinded during the day or night. (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion Diary entry for June 2, 1916)



Private MacPherson was still *standing to* two days later, until six o'clock on the evening of June 6 when his unit began the short three-kilometre march to the nearby *Camp "E"* which was reached within ninety minutes.

Just in case anyone had any doubts about the gravity of the situation, before departure...*An extra supply of bombs (grenades) was drawn from the dump, all detonated, and two issued to each individual in case of emergency; these they carry about with them until further orders.* (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion Diary entry for June 2, 1916)

Having reached *Camp "E"*, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to remain there for the night before then being ordered forward on the night of June 5-6 in order to relieve three depleted battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division\* which had received the brunt of the enemy attack and which had been fighting since the very first day.

*\*Officially coming into service at midnight of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division had trained for a period in tandem with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division in and about the Ploegsteert Sector before, in March and April of 1916, having become responsible for that south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

June 6 was to be the day on which the Germans made a further attack in the area of the village of *Hooge*, an advance preceded by the detonation of mines under certain Canadian positions and also by a ferocious barrage which caused numerous casualties among the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion personnel.

The infantry assault, while gaining ground in other places, was – according to the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary – *...brought to a standstill before they got within 300 yards of our trenches...by Private MacPherson and his comrades-in-arms posted in advance of the unit. The Battalion's losses for the day, relatively successful though it had been, were not light: Killed, 23; Wounded, 61; Missing, 2...*

(continued)

(Right: *Hooge Crater Cemetery began as a front-line cemetery in October of 1917 (Passchendaele) in the crater of a mine detonated more than two years earlier, in July of 1915 by the British. Those first buried numbered seventy-six; since then, particularly after the Armistice, with dead having been transferred from smaller burial grounds in the area, the count has risen to two-thousand three-hundred forty-eight. – photograph from 2010)*



There was to be no infantry action on the Battalion's front on the day following, June 7, but the enemy guns were nonetheless to claim more dead and wounded - as they were to do again on June 8. On the night of the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Private MacPherson's unit was relieved in the front line by the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion and was thereupon ordered to serve in Brigade Support to which end it was billeted in what by that time remained of Ypres.



According to the Battalion War Diarist's observations of that day: *The town is nothing but one mass of ruins, no inhabitants beyond military men to be seen.*

(Right above: *Ypres was, of course, to become progressively more and more a total ruin during the Great War and four years of bombardment. This was the city just after the conflict, in 1919. – from a vintage post-card)*

At that point the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion began to provide working-parties for tasks in and about the shattered city. On the night of June 11-12 it moved up into trenches in the *Hooge Sector* where it was to remain until June 14. During that period, while troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division undertook an infantry attack supported by a massive artillery barrage, Private MacPherson and his unit continued to occupy those aforementioned trenches and also to incur casualties from the enemy guns retaliating during both June 13 and 14 in reply to the Canadian assault – although the expected German counter-attack was not to come about.

The *official* fighting for *Mount Sorrel* concluded – despite the ongoing opposing artillery riposte – on June 13 and on the morrow, June 14, the Battalion was once again withdrawn into the vestiges of Ypres. Its casualties during those final days had been thirteen other ranks *killed in action* and fifty-three *wounded*.



(Right: *Sanctuary Wood Cemetery, within the bounds of which lie almost two-thousand dead of the Great War, two-thirds of which number remain unidentified – photograph from 2010)*

The retirement was to continue: By the morning of June 16, the unit was back at *Camp "H"* in the vicinity of Reninghelst, there to re-enforce and to re-organize its depleted forces.

(continued)

There was now to follow some ten weeks of relative calm for, in fact, the entire Canadian Corps as even the artillery activity gradually diminished and that of the infantry was reduced once more to patrolling, to wiring and to the occasional raid. In the case of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion, the only such venture in which it had been ordered – on or about August 7 - to participate was eventually to be cancelled, the officers of the Battalion responsible for it having decided that the enemy was dangerously alert to the situation.

Private MacPherson and the other Battalion personnel, when not in the front line, were to furnish working-parties, carrying-parties and wiring-parties; they were of course to undergo the inevitable training: gas-helmet (*mask*), musketry, bombing and bayonet drills; they were to lay cable and pipes; they were to be paraded for clothing, weapon and medical inspections; and they were to submit to the inevitable route marches – all of the above to be interspersed at times with an infrequent bath.

Some two weeks after the failed raid, on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month of that August of 1916, the unit had begun a withdrawal from Belgium, from *Ontario Camp* where it had been posted at the time, into northern France through the community of Steenvoorde where it billeted that night and, on the morrow, proceeded on to the area of Bollezeele, a further twenty kilometres to the west where a training area had been established and where the unit arrived later, on that August 22.

The following thirteen days were to be spent in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan. But the first item on the agenda had been the exchange of the unreliable Canadian-made Ross Rifle (see below) for its British counterpart, the Short Lee-Enfield Mark III.

*(Right below: Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing – and here now equipped with steel helmets and with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from The War Illustrated)*

*\*The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it would jam, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*



*By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.*

On the night of September 4-5 the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion marched southwards the twenty or so kilometres from Bollezeele to the railway station at the larger centre of St-Omer. At four-thirty on the morning of that second date, the unit entrained for the journey to *the Somme* by a circuitous route via the coastal towns of Boulogne and Étaples.

Almost ten hours later, having travelled but some one-hundred eighty kilometres, Private MacPherson arrived in the town of Candas from where the remaining thirty kilometres were to be undertaken on foot.

(Right: *Almost a century after the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion and others passed through it on their 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)



Two days following, the unit having passed through a number of smaller communities on the way - and having been billeted in two of them - on September 7, 1916, at one-thirty in the afternoon, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Alberta*) marched into the large military camp of *Brickfields*, in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert where it then bivouacked for the next four days.

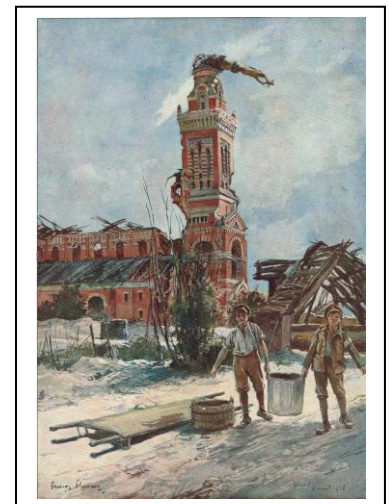
(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette* – photograph from 2015)



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

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 having been 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.

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 entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first *major* collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.

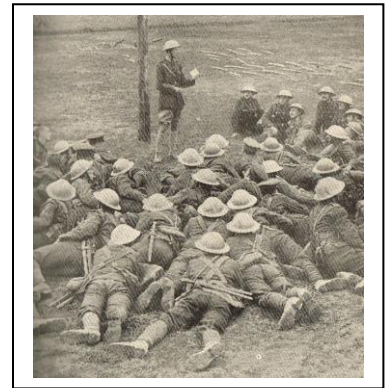


(Right above: *Canadian soldiers working, carrying water in the centre of Albert, the town's already-damaged basilica in the background* – from *Illustration*)

(continued)

From September 8 to 10 inclusive the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion – apart from working parties seconded for work elsewhere - remained at *Brickfields* or in the close vicinity thereof and trained – at times with aeroplanes – and organized in readiness for the offensive which was to come only days hence.

(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, in September 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)



Then, upon the receipt of Operational Orders from the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters in the evening of that latter date...*Battalion paraded and moved into support points... Relief was complete at 8.30 p.m....* (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 10, 1916)

The support(?) trenches occupied by Private MacPherson and his Battalion were in the area of the by-then ruined village of Pozières, lying astride the road from Albert to Bapaume which then also crossed the front-lines only metres to the east, the unit there to be welcomed by a heavy enemy barrage... *From there Carrying-Parties, composed of whole Battalion, carried water, ammunition, grenades, flares, sand-bags, tools etc. to advanced dumps in front line, one of which was destroyed by fire caused by enemy's shell.* (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

By half-past nine on the evening of September 14, the Battalion was...*taking up their various positions for the attack.* (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

(Right and right below: *Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial may be seen in both images.* – colour photograph from 2016)



On September 15 a further general offensive was hurled against the German defences at *the Somme*. For the most part it was to be British and Canadian troops involved, supported for the first time by the so-called *tanks*\*. The main Canadian contribution, in the area of the Albert-Bapaume axis, was to be that of troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Divisions, of the first of which the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – and thus the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion – was of course a part.

\*Originally to be designated as *'His Majesty's Landships'*, the code-name *'tanks'* was used to obscure the likely purpose of these huge metal monstrosities. The name stuck.

(continued)



***(Preceding page: One of the tanks employed during the First Battle of the Somme, here withdrawn from the field and standing in one of the parks where these machines were overhauled and maintained – from Le Miroir)***

***The 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> Battalions were to be among the first wave of the assaulting troops on that day. ...At 6.20 a.m. our barrage commenced, and assaulting troops went forward. (This and those passages below are excerpts from the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for September 15, 1916)***

***Right column (27<sup>th</sup> Bn. and 8 Platoons 31<sup>st</sup> Bn.) reported the first German line cleared at 6.27 a.m.***

***Left column (28<sup>th</sup> Bn. and 3 Platoons 31<sup>st</sup> Bn.) encountered a strong point in enemy's line where it joins the COURCELETTE-ORVILLERS Road. This was held by two machine guns and about 90 men, and took a little time to clear. All the first objectives in both attacks entailed much bombing and bayonet work by first wave and mopping-up party. As far as is known, enemy's barrage commence about 3 minutes after Zero, and first waves encountered only machine gun and rifle fire, chiefly from left flank outside the objective. Our barrage was excellent...***

***The second objective (SUNKEN ROAD) offered very little resistance, and Right column report that Germans surrendered at once. 70 German dead were counted here.***

***The first wave had suffered considerable casualties up to this point.***

***At 7.40 a.m. right column reported having taken final objective and were digging in...***

***The objectives of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade were all taken – and in some cases further gains made beyond – with defensive garrisons then installed as well as advanced posts created for Lewis Guns (light machine-guns). Thus the attack was halted, it being later reported that...All our positions were maintained and consolidated until 6.00 p.m., when the leading units of 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division passed beyond our line.***

***During this period, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was apparently not inactive, although the time of the following events is uncertain, possibly in the early afternoon after the capture of those final objectives...Two Platoons 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion in addition built a support line...***

***Three Patrols...from 31<sup>st</sup> Bn. rushed forward and established posts S.W. of COURCELETTE... These patrols reached point 30 and roads which diverge from this point, but could not get further until our barrage was lifted. Some men, however, entered outskirts of village. The right and left patrols found it impossible to retain their positions, both suffering heavily...***

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



***(continued)***

The War Diarist of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion (*Alberta*) has kept a count of the casualties incurred by his unit on September 15, 1916: it makes for depressive reading. The minimum figures were sixty-three *killed in action*; fifty-two *missing in action*; and one-hundred twenty-nine *wounded*.

In the records to be found in his own personal dossier, Private MacPherson is documented as having been taken to the Number 3 Canadian Stationary Hospital at Boulogne on September 16 for attention to a gun-shot wound to his right cheek. He would have been one of the one-hundred twenty-four injured to be admitted into that facility on that date.



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

However, the date and circumstances of Private MacPherson’s injury appear not to be available; neither is his name to be found on that casualty list for September 15 – there is another MacPherson, but his is not *our* regimental number. This may, of course, suggest that the incident during which he was wounded occurred on another day – but nothing is absolutely clear *a propos* except the date and place of his subsequent hospitalization.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was to remain undergoing treatment in hospital at Boulogne for twenty-three days at which time, on October 9, he was forwarded to the 7<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Camp from where, only three days later again, Private MacPherson was transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Large Rest Camp, both of these camps also being in the area of Boulogne.



(Right above: *A further view of the French sea-side town and port of Boulogne just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

His travels were not yet over: On October 15 he was *taken on strength* by the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of Le Havre where he was classed as “B2” - *Able to walk five miles to and from work, see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes* – and capable of manual labour.

The next documentation on Private MacPherson is dated only two days after his arrival at the Base Depot and it records him having been admitted into the nearby 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Stationary Hospital – at Harfleur – for treatment for what was at the time diagnosed as NYD (*Not Yet Determined*). Unfortunately there appear to be no further reports on the matter.

On November 23, perhaps because of his former occupation as a stenographer, Private Macpherson was ordered attached to the Canadian Section of General Headquarters where he was to become a temporary clerk in the office of the Assistant Adjutant-General\*. It was a posting which was to last for almost eighteen months.

(continued)

***\*The Canadian Section was at least partially attached to the British General Headquarters which, as of 1916 until the end of the conflict, was located in the French community of Montreuil-sur-Mer in the Pas-de-Calais department. The Canadian General Staff, however, for at least a part of 1917, was based at Camblain l'Abbé. The Canadian Archives do not appear to have as yet digitized all of the relevant files.***

During those months at the Canadian Section there are just two records to be found among his files pertaining to Private MacPherson: on March 18 of 1917 a Medical Board upgraded his classification from “B” to “A” which categorized him as fit for general service; and on December 17 of the same 1917 he was granted a fifteen-day period of leave – likely spent back in the United Kingdom although this is not documented.



***(Right above: London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card)***

Then on May 3 of 1918 he...*ceases to be attached to Cdn Section as clerk.* He thus returned to the Canadian Base Depot by this time re-established in the French coastal town of Étaples where he was *taken on strength* on May 5. On May 22, seventeen days later, Private MacPherson was despatched to the *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp* at Aubin St-Vaast, some thirty kilometres to the south-east where he reported *to duty* on the same day\*.

***\*This from his personal dossier; the Reinforcement Camp War Diary does not record his arrival on either that day or the next.***

On June 11, 1918, Private MacPherson was one of a draft of thirty *other ranks* ordered to report from the CCRC to the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion in the field. The detachment – numbering thirty-two in the Battalion War Diary - arrived in the community of Bretencourt to the south-west of Arras, on the same June 11, perhaps in time to see the football game played that day between the new arrivals’ unit and the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion: the 27<sup>th</sup> was victorious, one to nil.

\* \* \* \* \*

By this time it had been twenty-one months since the injury to Private MacPherson at *the Somme* and his admission into hospital at Boulogne.

On the morning of September 16, 1916, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn to *Brickfields Camp* where the depleted unit had received re-enforcements before a further retirement on foot to the vicinity of the community of Fieffes. There it was to spend four days, September 19-22, before its return into the trenches at Courcellette in the late evening of the 25<sup>th</sup>. It was now to take part in a further offensive.



The action known to history as the *Battle of Thiepval Ridge* officially took place on September 26-28, 1916 - the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion having been withdrawn on the latter date - although the fighting was in fact to continue until the final day of the month\*.



***\*Part of the area attacked by the Canadians was the defensive system of Regina Trench. Despite several attempts during September and October to take the place, it was not to fall until the night of November 10-11.***

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

The Alberta Battalion had advanced in the first wave of the assault at Zero Hour, 12.35 p.m. and from the very beginning had incurred heavy casualties. By the time of the relief of the unit – and the entire 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – it had recorded sixty *killed in action*, two-hundred nine *wounded* and one-hundred thirteen *missing in action*. On September 30, the Battalion, while it was re-enforcing and re-organizing at *Tara Valley Camp*,...the *Commanding Officer appointed 1 Coy. Sergeant Major, 1 Quartermaster Sergeant, 19 Sergeants, 8 Lance Sergeants, 26 Corporals and 22 Lance Corporals to fill vacancies caused by casualties.*



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

On the evening of October 1 the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had once again made its way forward but was simply to be held in reserve in the area of Pozières, and it was not until the evening of October 3 that it had marched back to bivouac in *Brickfields Camp*. On the following afternoon the unit had then marched westward for twelve kilometres as far as Warloy, the first of several stages as it had retired from the area and the *First Battle of the Somme*.

It was then subsequently to pass to the west of the bruised city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. It had marched for twelve days via communities such as La Vicogne, Pernois, Gezaincourt Canteleux, Frévillers and Hersin until October 16 at which time it was to immediately begin a six-day tour in trenches in the *Number 2 Souchez Sector*. The Battalion was to enjoy its first reprieve on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the month when it, in turn, was relieved to fall back to the vicinity of Ablain St-Nazaire\*.



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

***(Right: The remnants of the village of Souchez as it already was in 1915 before the British took the area over from the French – from Le Miroir)***



**(continued)**

***\*The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion would remain in this area – Souchez, Ablain St- Nazaire, Noulette Wood, Lorette Spur and the Bouvigny Huts – until mid-January when it moved to another sector.***

That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, thus having allowed the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion – and many others – a relatively quiet return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare. Nevertheless, General Headquarters had already been planning for future operations.

During this tranquil period there was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and wiring, and the occasional raids by either side, although the number of them undertaken by the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diarist appears to have been zero.



***(Right above: The northern village of Ablain St-Nazaire as it was already by the summer of 1915, having been the site of furious fighting between the Germans and the French during that year – from Le Miroir)***

The medical facilities during this period were to be kept much more busy by cases of sickness and of dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.

***(Right: A detachment of Canadian troops moving up to forward positions during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)***



From mid-January to mid-February the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had trained in rear areas close to the communities of Ourton and Burbure after which it had returned for the next month to service closer to the front lines, and forward from such places as Mont St-Éloi and Écoivres.

***(Right and right below: Écoivres Military Cemetery, Mont St. Eloi, at the outset was a communal cemetery where the French buried their military dead during the time when they were responsible for the area. Later the British and then the Canadians were to use the burial ground, the Canadians particularly for the fallen of April 9, 1917, at Vimy Ridge. Today more than seventeen-hundred identified British and Commonwealth dead lie within its bounds as well as four German and just fewer than eight-hundred French. – from a vintage post-card (above) and colour photograph from 2016)***



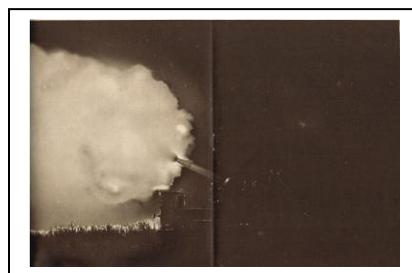
On the eighth day of the month of March the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had again been ordered withdrawn well to the rear, now to the vicinity of Petit Servins, where once more it was to undergo intensive training. On this occasion the sixteen day course was to offer a number of new – and perhaps even novel - elements: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned

against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly frontal assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts...

...and at *Vimy Ridge* and elsewhere, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the presence of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.

On March 24...*At 2.15 p.m. the Battalion moved out of MONT ST. ELOY, and proceeded to relieve the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the front line in the THELUS SECTOR...*this in fact being the area in which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to operate during the first days of the upcoming offensive. Much of this time, however, was spent by the Battalion personnel in duties outside the trenches, particularly in the conveyance of munitions and other necessary supplies.

As the final days had passed, the preparatory artillery barrage\* which was to officially commence on April 2 had been growing progressively heavier. On April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion was to describe it simply as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans had undoubtedly been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in turn had been throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were to be very busy.



*\*It ought to be noted that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British division – only a single brigade employed on April 9 – also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*

(Right above: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration*)

As the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was not to be in the first waves of the attack, on the night of April 4-5 it was ordered to retire from the forward area of the *Thelus Sector* to *Assiniboine Camp* in the Bois des Alleux, there to await the evening of April 8 to move once more, on this occasion up to its assembly points. ...*Progress was very slow owing to all trenches and routes being much congested by the large number of troops on the move... Reports from all companies that they were in position were received...by 3.25 a.m. on the 9<sup>th</sup>...* (Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)



(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood atop Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

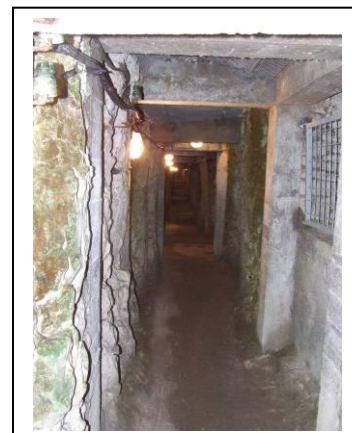
(continued)

On April 9 the British Army had launched its offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be 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 having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

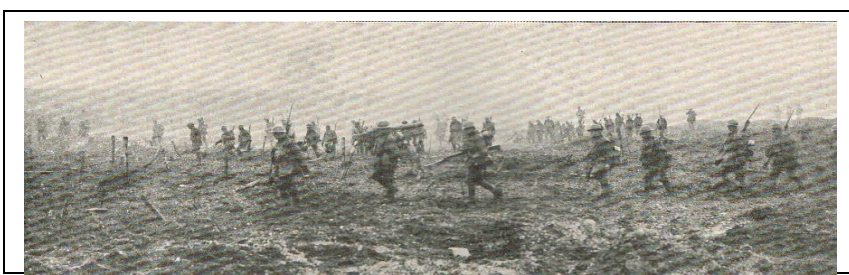
While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* would be yet a further disaster.

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – indeed, on this occasion, British troops were under *2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division* command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the following day having cleared the area almost entirely of its German occupants.

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



(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division equipped 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: *Canadians under shell-fire occupy the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)



Excerpts from the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917:

*Assembly completed at 3.30 a.m...  
At ZERO (5.30 a.m.) leading Brigades attacked...  
At 8.05 a.m., 31<sup>st</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> together with one sub-section of 6<sup>th</sup> M.G. Coy (Machine-Gun Company) and 2 Stokes of 6<sup>th</sup> T.M. Bty. (Trench Mortar Battery) advanced from the assembly position. Severe shelling was encountered...crossing our own front line. Several casualties occurred here.  
Our leading Battalions reported in position...and ready for advance on THELUS Trench.  
At 9.55 a.m. THELUS Trench was captured and first section of THELUS... (Thélus was, and today still is, a village, albeit entirely reconstructed.)  
At 10.40 a.m. Hill 135 and THELUS were captured...*

(continued)

**At 10.50 a.m., 31<sup>st</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> had reached BLUE Objective and reported to be in touch with R.W. Kents (British troops – Royal West Kents) on left and 4<sup>th</sup> Cdn. Inf. Bn. on right...  
...Throughout the afternoon and night, 28<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> Battns. consolidated a main line east of THELUS across the whole Brigade Front...**

Thus concluded the successful first day of the participation of the 31<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Alberta*) at the taking of *Vimy Ridge* - although the *Battle of Arras* was to continue into the middle of the following month.

A postscript to the above short account of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion's role at *Vimy Ridge* must be, of course, the unit's casualty list. During the five days of April 8-12 (inclusive) the cost to the Battalion had been fifteen *killed in action*, sixty-nine *wounded*, five *missing* and one *wounded and missing*.

The Germans, once having lost *Vimy Ridge* and any advantages of the high ground, had then retreated some three kilometres into prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks were also to reclaim ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle (see below) in early May.



(Right above: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge, anonymous dead lying in the foreground: The fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)

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

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, but highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – however, such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift, if any at all, movement of guns and material – and in any case, the orders had been... *to consolidate*.



Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* to be fought in the manner of the first two days and, by the end of those five weeks, little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

(continued)

By the time that the *Battle of Arras* had officially drawn to its conclusion on May 15, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been withdrawn into reserve, to rest and to train – if that is not a contradiction – near the village of Aux Rietz - today known as La Targette - not far distant from the area of Écoivres-Mont St-Éloi, already familiar to the personnel of the unit.

(Right below: *Six-hundred thirty-eight British and Commonwealth dead of the Great War lie within the bounds of La Targette British Cemetery (formerly Aux Rietz Military Cemetery). Behind it repose the remains of some eleven-thousand French soldiers, mostly from 1915, and, a kilometre distant, is a German cemetery with its forty-five thousand dead. – photograph from 2014*)

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion's final infantry operation had been in the area of the *Arleux Loop* and, more precisely, in the vicinity of the once-village of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle\*. It would be fought over the space of seven days, May 3-9 (inclusive), with the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion having been involved in all but the last day. At the outset ground had been gained but subsequent German counter-attacks were to regain all that they had lost.



Fresnoy was to be a costly affair for the Battalion – and for the Canadians overall - as the Alberta unit would report ninety *killed in action*, three-hundred fifty-six *wounded*, and eighty *missing in action*: a count six times greater than during the attack on *Vimy Ridge*.

*\*Not to be confused with a second Fresnoy (Fresnoy-le-Grand), it to be found only some forty kilometres distant to the west of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle.*

For the remainder of the month of May after the *Aux Rietz Rest Camp*, the Battalion had returned to serve in the area of the *village* of Vimy, in positions along the railway line from Arras to Lens. It was to be a quiet period.



(Right above: *The village of Vimy – several kilometres distant from the Ridge of the same name – as it was by the conclusion of the conflict – from a vintage post-card*)

June was to prove even quieter than the preceding period at Vimy as it was spent well behind the lines in the area of the community of Houdain where the entire month would be spent in parades, training, lectures, presentation of decorations, sports, weapons' courses, band concerts, route marches, physical training, musketry...



(Right above: *While resting in the rear area during the summer of 1917, Canadian troops peruse the program of an upcoming concert pinned onto the door of a temporary theatre. – from Illustration*)

(continued)

July 1, Dominion Day of 1917, was to be notable for a parade followed by an inspection by the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Commander-in-Chief and the Major-General Commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diarist had then summed up in his entry for that day: *Today is the last day of a very enjoyable month's rest. At no other time in the history of the Battalion has a period of rest been conducted under such ideal conditions. We are to move tomorrow to the area in front and N.W. of Lens.*

And to cap it all off...*An issue of free beer was made to the men tonight.*

The Battalion's new area of responsibility was to be somewhat different from what it had experienced before. It was to be the principal coal-mining region of France and whereas the Canadians' war, except when posted in the Belgian city of Ypres, had up until now been fought in open country-side, the sectors between the town of Béthune and the city of Lens was – as it still is today - a succession of pit-heads running along the top of the coal seams, and the communities surrounding them which in peace-time housed the miners, the local support industries, and their families.

Thus the Canadians were now to be fighting in streets rather than fields, and would be billeted in miners' cottages rather than in tents and huts. Many of the trenches were in places which bore the designation of Cité – oft-times followed by the name of a saint – which signified a miners' district\*. It was also an area which was apparently subject to more artillery and trench-mortar fire than was the norm in other places.



*\*The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion during this period was posted to the forward area in the Cité St-Pierre. The word 'fosse' also appears in certain accounts pertaining to this region: apart from meaning a ditch it also signifies the pit-head of a mine, in this area a colliery.*

(Right above: *The mining village of Loos just to the north of Lens, its pit-head towers visible in the background – and known to British troops as 'Tower Bridge' – as it was already by the end of the year 1915 – from Le Miroir*)

The British High Command by this time had, long before, decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from this area, it had ordered that other operations take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort and one of their primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the mining centre of Lens; to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions had been entrusted the responsibility for the capture of the aforementioned position.

(continued)

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been designated to act as Brigade Reserve for this action and was thus in fact to moving to the rear on August 13, having been relieved by elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades which were then moving in the opposite direction on the way to their eventual assembly points.

(Preceding page: *An 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*)

(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

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

Yet *Hill 70* had been high enough to have been considered - by no-one less than the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – as the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

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

Objectives had been 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 had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it was to prove; on the 16<sup>th</sup> several strong counter-attacks were to be launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by that time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences had held firm and the Canadian artillery, by then employing newly-developed procedures, would inflict heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* was thus to remain in Canadian hands.

(Right: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)





**(Preceding page: A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here in the summer of 1917 under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action by personnel of the Canadian Garrison Artillery – from *Le Miroir*)**

**Excerpt from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for August 15, 1917: Battalion “Stood-to” at 4.00 a.m. this morning and during the attack of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions, North-West of LENS, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division to the West of LENS working in conjunction. The 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade\* was held in Divisional Reserve, and, except for furnishing carrying-parties, did not take an active part in the attack. The attack, after one or two minor hold-ups had been overcome, was entirely successful and resulted in the fall, to the Canadians, of Hill 70.**

**Even on the day following, there had apparently been no call for the services of the Battalion: ...In spite of the many counter-attacks attempted by the enemy to regain ground, we have not yet been called on to go forward to assist. This excerpt is from the entry of August 16, and the same was to apply on the day afterwards and again on August 18.**



**(Right above: *The spoils of war: Canadian officers and men on some of the terrain on which they had recently fought – and captured – from *Le Miroir**)**

**The unit was then to remain in Brigade Reserve until August 22, although the locale of the Reserve positions had changed on two occasions as the front line had moved forward. During these few days the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion would serve to furnish carrying-parties until, on the above date, it had been relieved and withdrawn to *Noulette Wood* huts. Two days later it had then moved into the *Gauchin Legal Rest Area*.**



**(Right above: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917: The use of the head-band – the ‘Tump’ - to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America. – from *Le Miroir**)**

**Apparently the Canadian offensive campaign of the summer had been planned so as to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British offensive in Belgium had been proving a disappointment compared to what had been anticipated – unsatisfactory enough for the generals to call a temporary four-week halt - and the High Command had begun to look for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses.**

**The Australians, the New Zealanders\* and then the Canadians had been ordered to prepare to move north, thus the Canadians were to be obliged to abandon any further plans that they might have had.**

**\*The Anzac Forces (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) of the early years of the War were now serving as two separate entities: the Australian Imperial Force and the New Zealand Division.**

There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the *Lens-Béthune Sectors* and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area.

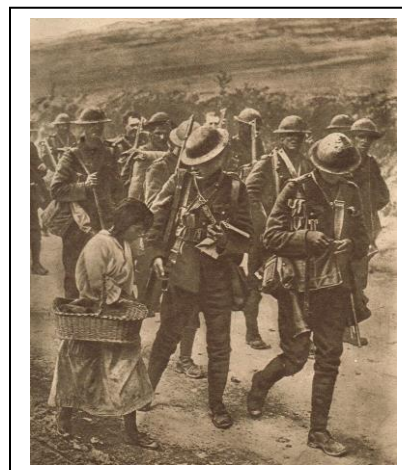
On most days, our source being as usual the Battalion War Diary, it had been the artillery of both sides which was to be active – but, of course as ever, the infantry was usually the target. However, there were to be several occasions on which the unit had been withdrawn to areas behind the lines, particularly for training; and the War Diaries of different battalions also show that sports had been by this time considered to be more and more a morale booster among the troops.

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to remain posted to the Rest Area at Gauchin Légal for twenty-four days – although, according to the unit's War Diary, *rest* appears not to have been a priority – until September 17 when it was to march the ten kilometres to Villers-au-Bois. It there was to stay – still in the rear area for the next nine days when, on September 26, it had set out for the *Mericourt-Avion Sector* south of Lens where, for the first time in over a month, the unit had found itself back in the forward area, relieving the 26<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front line.



(Right above: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries.* – photograph from 2017)

(Right: *Canadian soldiers on the march in the rear area during the summer of 1917, reportedly – by the publisher - buying out-dated English newspapers from a young French girl – from *Le Miroir**)



This short tour of only three days surely brought the Battalion personnel back to reality – if indeed this were necessary: during the approach into those new positions the unit had been shelled; there had been heavy enemy shelling at dusk on the next day and an enemy raid had been repulsed on the morrow, September 28. Only on the occasion of the Battalion's withdrawal, September 29, had the War Diarist been able to document...*Enemy very quiet all day.*

The Battalion was now to spend a further three and a-half weeks in the more southerly sectors of the area of Canadian responsibility: at la Chaudière when assigned to the forward area, then Neuville St-Vaast and Camblain l'Abbé further back before final days at Caucourt as it awaited the order to move northward and into Belgium to serve for a second occasion, almost fourteen months after it had withdrawn from there to fight in the *First Battle of the Somme.*

(continued)

(Right: *The Canadian National Monument on Vimy Ridge as seen when looking southwards from the Chaudière Sector which had been German occupied territory on April 9, 1917 – photograph from 1914*)

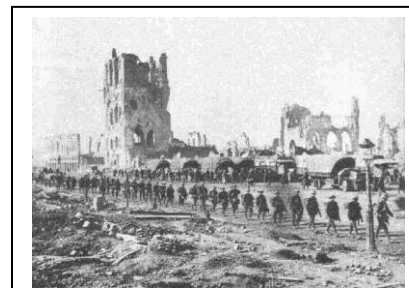


(Right below: *Camblain l'Abbé, the village shown here to be a little less busy than it had been a hundred years before, was one of the locales of the Canadian General Headquarters of 1917 – photograph from 2017*)



It was not, however, to be until the final weeks of October of 1917 that the Canadians had become embroiled in the British-led offensive to the north-east of Ypres.

Officially labelled as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – at least ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.



(Right: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it had been they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3 it would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which had spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse had been true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division – including the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion - finally having entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.



(Right above: *An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

Excerpts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of October 20, 1917: *The Battalion started to move to Belgium today at 8.40 a.m.... The move took place as a Brigade march, this unit being the third in the line... The Battalion arrived in Ham en Artois at 2.45 p.m. in splendid condition... Billets are good, although limited.*

It had been in the late morning of October 24 that the Battalion would parade to the railway station at Caucourt for the first real stage in its transfer to Belgium and to *Passchendaele*. Even then it was only as far – by train and then on foot – as the proximity of the community of Hondeghem, north of the larger centre of Hazebrouck and still some ten kilometres distant from the Franco-Belgian frontier.

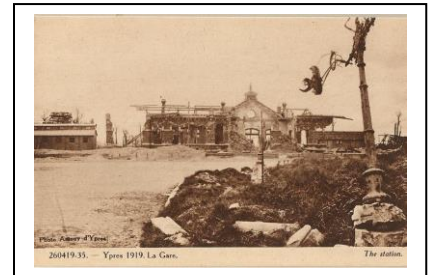
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**(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)**



The unit now was to stay in the area of Hondegheem and train for the next ten days. On November 1 the personnel had been apprised that...*The 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade has been honoured to be selected for the attack on the village of Passchendaele.*

Two more days were now to pass and not until November 3 had the unit marched to Cæstre to board a train which was to transport it across the border and to a camp near the Belgian village of Brandhœk, a small community to the west of the city of Ypres. The Battalion was now very close to where it had served in late 1915 until August of 1916 – but one wonders how many were now left who had been there back then.



**(Right: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained en route to Potijze on November 4: the image is from 1919. – from a vintage post-card*)**

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to spend but a single night at *St. Lawrence Camp*, Brandhœk, before then journeying the short twelve kilometres to Ypres. The railway station then, as now, was just outside the southern ramparts of the city and to attain Potijze, its destination, the unit likely had crossed the vestiges of the place on foot, having passed in front of the remnants of the venerable *Cloth Hall* (as in the photograph on an above page) and the city centre on its way.

Excerpt from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for November 4, 1917: *On arrival at POTIJZE, the Battalion bivouaced (sic) for the remainder of the day. This being “X” Day for the Passchendaele operations, the final preparations for the attack – such as the issue of extra S.A.A. (Small Arms Ammunition), bombs, tools, rations &c – were made and by dark all was in readiness for the move to the ASSEMBLY AREA.*

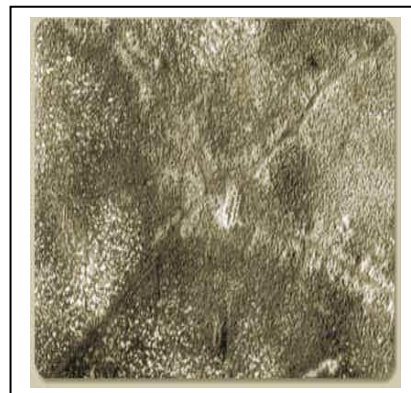


**(Right above: *When trenches were destroyed, as occurred often, troops sought whatever shelter could be found - in shell-holes or as here, in a mine-crater. – from Le Miroir*)**

**(Right: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument pictured below – this ground lies in the direction of Zonnebeke – a kilometre or so away - where the 3<sup>1st</sup> Battalion was fighting on November 6, 1917. – photograph from 2010*)**



Excerpt from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for November 5, 1917: *At midnight, after partaking of hot tea, the Battalion moved off for ABRAHAM HEIGHTS relieving the 24<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion, and by daylight all ranks were stowed away in the available shelter. Each Company sent forward a reconnaissance party... The final details were settled during the day, and at dusk the first Company moved off for the Assembly position, the remainder following at intervals of fifteen minutes...*



(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

Excerpt from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for November 6, 1917: *...After a quiet night the attack on the village of PASSCHENDAELE was launched at 6.00 a.m. and by 8.00a.m. the entire town was in the hands of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade...*

*The evening found all well established on the eastern outskirts of the town with a well consolidated (sic) trench along the whole Brigade front.*



Of course, having had bestowed upon it the *honour* of leading the attack on Passchendaele village had come at a price: Fifty-eight all ranks *killed in action* or *died of wounds*; thirteen *missing in action*; two-hundred seven *wounded*; fourteen *wounded* but remained *on duty*.

(Right above: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial (see right and below). – photograph from 2010*)



(Right above: *In Tyne Cot Cemetery there lie just fewer than twelve-thousand dead of which some seventy-five hundred remain unidentified; on the Tyne Cot Memorial – the panels on the wall – are commemorated a further thirty-five thousand who have no known grave. Among them are to be counted many of those who ‘had the honour’ of attacking Passchendaele Ridge. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge – photograph from 2015*)

On November 7, the day after its involvement in the attack, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been relieved and had retired to Potijze for the night. On the morrow it had been on its way again, back to *St. Lawrence Camp*, Brandhoeek, where a German aeroplane had bombed it, killing and wounding several of its personnel.

Two days later again the Battalion had travelled by train whence it had come only five days before, to Cæstre and then on foot to Hondeghem. It had spent just less than a week altogether in Belgium.

The respite at Hondeghem had been even more short-lived than that at *St. Lawrence Camp*: a single night before a bus-ride – apparently the unit's first-ever journey taken by bus since its arrival in France - further towards the south to Robecq, to Auchel and finally to Camblain l'Abbé where it arrived on November 13. The Battalion and the majority of the other units of the Canadian Corps – the exceptions having been some of the artillery - were by this time reporting back to the sectors which they had left some weeks before in order to fight at *Passchendaele*.

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was now back close to places with which it was familiar: Mont St-Éloi, Neuville St-Vaast, Aux Rietz, and was eventually to be posted to *Cellar Camp* in the same vicinity. When sent to the forward area the unit was once again to be ordered into the Méricourt Sector.

Then came the first ten days of December when the Battalion was employed not only in the customary training but also in the construction of a new camp; but there was to be a *special* event of sorts during that month of December, 1917: the Canadian Forces overseas were to participate in the National Election. The War Diarist of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion makes mention of the vote having taken place among Battalion personnel as of December 3 and then for the following four days\*.

*\*He seems to have made no comment on the percentage of the unit's participation, but in some instances, in other units, it had been reported that ninety per cent and more were to cast their ballot. Also, apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

The 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion now received a pleasant Christmas gift from the powers that be: four weeks far from the dangers of the front lines. The village to which the unit was to be posted was St-Hilaire, sixteen kilometres to the north-west of the historic town of Béthune and the unit was to train there until January 18 at which time it and the other battalions of the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had begun the march back to the areas of Villers-au-Bois and Neuville St-Vaast.



(Right above: *The historic northern French town of Béthune as it was by the conclusion of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(continued)

Apart from those happy interludes, the routine of the day – front, support, reserve, rain, snow, mud, patrols, wiring, raids, shelling, sniping, bombing, carrying-parties, working-parties, inspections, church, sports, concerts, musketry, drills, route-marches, cuts, scrapes, tooth-ache, colds, ‘flu and the occasional bath - was to prove much the same during this fourth winter of the *Great War* as it had been during the previous three – apart from the new mustard-gas.



(Right above: *After four years of constant bombardment – by both sides – the city of Lens looked like this at the conclusion of the conflict – from a vintage post-card*)

Ten days later the Battalion was back in the trenches, in the *Avion Sector* south of Lens, a posting which was new to the unit. Excerpts from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for January 28, 1918, the day on which the Battalion took control of its new sector: *This is entirely a new front to the Battalion, and although very similar to the recent fronts occupied by the Brigade, movement by day to the front line is practically impossible. This has been caused by the thaw following upon the recent snow making the trenches cave in and blocking of same...*

*The Companies are very comfortable and are accommodated principally in deep dugouts, most of these having been evacuated by the Bosche during the VIMY RIDGE offensive. In one case 2 Coys. are billeted in an old brewery...and the accommodation is undoubtedly the best ever witnessed so close to the front line...*

Perhaps on the negative side, it appears that the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was in dire need of reinforcement as the War Diarist cites working-parties being furnished by the unit, their numbers totalling...*7 Officers and 275 O.R.s, not including N.C.O.s*. He then concludes these figures by adding that...*This is considered a very good number at the present strength of the Battalion; in fact all available men are out working.*

The remainder of that month, of February and of early March were spent in the afore-mentioned and adjacent sectors. There was little of anything extraordinary to report during this period: on occasion the War Diarist has remarked that the British and Canadian Artillery undertook heavy *shoots* against the opposing lines and that the Germans retaliated in kind by bombarding the Canadian trenches.



As ever, it was the infantry that was to receive the brunt of the guns' attention and, it goes without saying, was to incur the majority of the casualties thus caused.

(Right above: *A captured German field-piece, here receiving the attention of a Canadian officer – from Le Miroir*)

(continued)

There had also been raids undertaken sporadically, the High Command apparently believing that not only did it keep alive the offensive spirit, but that it was good for morale – perhaps not too surprisingly, many of the troops ordered to undertake these ventures seem to have been in general less enthusiastic than their superiors.

But the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was not to put either of these opinions to the test: the War Diarist has pointed out that, for whatever reason, the sector of the front line occupied by the unit had been deemed as...*unsuitable for raids*.

On March 13 the Battalion completed a two-day transfer by train and on foot from the area of Lens via *Summit Camp*, La Haie, to the rear area in the vicinity of the community of Houdain for more training. There the unit was to enjoy not only...*good billets*...but also it appears that...*An inspection of kitchens and food showed that the cooks are profiting by the lessons learned at the Schools*.

The unit was to have ten days during which to enjoy all these amenities. And, of course, March 21 was the first day of spring.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans were to come to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the war, the enemy launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21 – the first day of spring.

The main force of the attack was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the old battlefields of 1916, and it was to descend for the greater part on the British Fifth Army stationed there, particularly where its forces were serving adjacent to French units.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources say that this image is of neighbouring Liévin - in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)



The German advance continued for some two weeks, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and a great deal of French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

\*A second but lesser such offensive, '*Georgette*', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division. It also was to be successful for a while, but had petered out by the end of the month.

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



(continued)



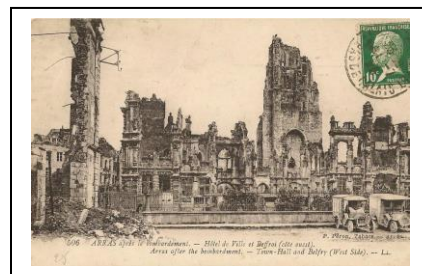
It appears that even the War Diarist – an officer – of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was unaware of the gravity of the situation at *the Somme* until March 23, two days after the outset of the German attack. Many other War Diaries exhibit the same unawareness.

By that date the Battalion had already been scheduled to march to its next posting at Estrée-Cauchie. It had done so in accordance with its orders...*but owing to the very unsettled nature of reports from the South the Battalion did not go into billets but rested in a field for 5 or 6 hours when...the Battalion moved by bus to VILLERS-AU-BOIS...*

On the following day, March 24, the Battalion remained *in situ* and played football.

On the morrow again, later in the day during the evening and night, the majority of the Battalion personnel was employed in six hours of manual labour: digging defensive positions and trenches.

On the following day yet again, March 26, the entire 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was ordered to...*stand by ready to move in 1 hour*. It then undertook an long overnight march, from eleven o'clock in the late evening until seven o'clock the next morning, of seventeen miles - twenty-eight kilometres – to arrive in the area of Pommier, south-west of Arras.



(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

*\*The area just to the south and west of Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive. Unsure as to what the enemy's intentions were, the High Command moved the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division into the area to forestall any attack, if and when it occurred, to protect the avenue to the Channel ports and also the coal-fields in the area of Béthune.*

*In the event, the offensive in that direction was stopped cold by the British Third Army before it reached Arras, but during the period of the crisis the Germans had stayed active enough to keep the British and Canadians wondering.*

*As for the situation to the north, it apparently was never deemed serious enough to warrant any Canadian movement in that direction\*.*

On March 29 and 30, the wanderings of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion seem to have come to an at least temporary halt, in the nearby area of Bellacourt and then, also close by, in trenches some eight hundred metres east of Wailly, part of the defensive system known as the *Purple Line*. This latter community, Wailly, had by this time become a pivotal position in the British and Canadian scheme of things (see immediately below).

Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 1, 1918: *The village of WAILLY is more or less a nest of heavy guns and the weather being suitable, quite a lot of shooting was accomplished. Later in the afternoon, the Bosche, discovering the location of the Batteries, made things quite unpleasant and caused quite a few casualties by shell fire.*

(continued)

**(Right below: *Wailly Orchard Cemetery was first a front-line burial ground first used in May of 1916, but it was greatly expanded by the Canadians in 1918 of whom one-hundred eighty-nine dead lie therein. – photograph from 2015)***

A five-day tour in the forward trenches was accompanied by orders to anticipate a German attack in the area but, as seen in \* above, although there had been an enemy offensive in the direction of Arras, it had been repulsed by the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. Artillery fire, although at times heavy and prolonged, and a number of raids were to be all that the Canadian forces would have to contend with. By the evening of April 9 the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been relieved and had returned to the *Purple Line* at Wailly.



When the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had next been ordered into the forward positions it was to be in the sector close to the village of Neuville St-Vitasse, east of Wailly, which would be one of the areas in which the unit was now to operate for the following weeks. The other had been in front of Bailleulval, west of Wailly, which was also where the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade would launch a raid on May 3 - although the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was to be involved in it only marginally.

By that time a relative calm had been beginning to descend as the German threat had faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but had gained nothing of any military significance on either of the southern fronts. The same was later to be true of the offensive of April 9, further to the north.

Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce\*.

*\*And the Germans were also busy elsewhere on the Western Front; the offensives launched against British and Commonwealth forces were not the only battles to be fought. During this period Ludendorff, up until late spring, was also busy attacking the French.*

The Allies, nevertheless, from the point of view of re-enforcement were soon to be a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene\*.

*\*The arrival of those troops from the Russian Front was to represent the final substantial reserves available to the German High Command. On the other hand, as seen above, their adversaries would soon see not only a superiority but a supremacy in numbers. It was to be only a matter of time.*



An overall Allied Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the *Wikipedia* web-site)

Meanwhile, having spent a week withdrawn into Bailleulval, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been ordered back to the Neuville St-Vitasse Sector, to the area of *Telegraph Hill*, although it was to serve at first in Brigade Reserve. At the time this had entailed strengthening the defences of an already formidable defensive position; there was to be little sign of any enemy activity apart from the ever-present artillery fire.

The Battalion had then moved forward to relieve the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion on May 15, but since there had been little if any infantry activity on the part of the enemy, and since the forward trenches had been found in a reportedly lamentable condition, the troops who had furnished the working-parties in the reserve area were now to provide the manpower for the working-parties in the support and front-line areas.

As the days had passed however, reconnaissance patrols were to become more numerous: the stage was to be set for a raid by the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion on the German emplacements opposite, on the night of May 21-22. According to the War Diarist, the operation had been a success despite a casualty count of seven *killed in action or died of wounds*, thirty-four *wounded* and two *missing in action*.

Later in the day of May 22 the Battalion had been relieved and had moved back into Divisional Reserve to be encamped at *Wailly Huts* where a bath and clean clothes – rarities indeed – would await the personnel on the morrow. It was to be a six-day respite and on its return forward on May 28, although only as far up as Brigade Reserve, the unit would be joined for two days by two officers and five N.C.O.s from the by-then newly-arriving American forces.



(Right above: *In nearby Arras once more, one of the first houses to be shelled during the Great War, on October 6, 1914* – from a vintage post-card)

Thus once more the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had found itself back in the *Purple Line* where, for once, it would seem that there was to be no call for working-parties. Never at a loss to find work for idle hands, however, the Battalion authorities had organized training in the trenches, particularly in the use of – and co-operation with – Lewis Guns, those light machine-guns with which the Battalion had by now been equipped with thirty-six.

Perhaps not completely unexpectedly, by the time that this training had concluded, on or about June 1, working-parties had once again been found to be necessary.

On June 4 the Alberta Battalion was to be in the front area once more. It appears that at the time a number of units had been undertaking raids in the area – even the Germans mounted one\*. However, the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion appears to have been one of the exceptions to the rule and had remained in its defensive positions. Working-parties had continued as also had the German artillery barrage which was heavy for several successive days.

*\*They tended to do so less and less as their policy became more defensive in nature.*

On June 9 the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion had been relieved. On June 10 it had then reached its billets – new ones – at not-distant Bretencourt. And on the next day, June 11, that aforementioned draft of thirty-two *other ranks* was to report *to duty* with the unit from the *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp*.

Private MacPherson had returned to the fray.

\* \* \* \* \*

After having spent four days at Bretencourt, Private MacPherson and his 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion relieved the 26<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front line on the night of June 15-16. Apart from the everyday routine grind of duty in the forward area, the personnel of the Battalion was now anticipating an upcoming raid for which the preparations were already well advanced.

The operation took place on the morning of June 24 and was deemed to have been...a huge success. Excerpt from the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 24, 1918: *...the Bn. raided the enemy's defences in NEUVILLE-VITASSE in conjunction with the 27<sup>th</sup> Cdn. Bn. on our right. The thorough preparations proved themselves, as the Bn, advanced in exactly the same manner as when going over the taped Course at WAILLY...everyone reaching his objective. A large number of the enemy were killed, dugouts were destroyed, and trench mortars and placements rendered useless. We captured 21 prisoners, including one Officer, and three Machine Guns. The gallantry shown by all was of the highest order...*

Unfortunately there are no details documented as to Private MacPherson's contribution to the operation, or even if he had played any role in it, since not every member of the Battalion had been involved. Casualties – all ranks - were recorded by the War Diarist as follows: sixteen *killed in action*, forty-four *wounded* (one having *remained on duty*), and six *missing in action*.

It was not until the night of June 28-29 that the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was then relieved to fall back again to Bretencourt. It had been a thirteen-day tour in the front line for the unit, a long period, particularly when one remembers that the Battalion had remained in those forward trenches for four days after a fairly-major infantry action.

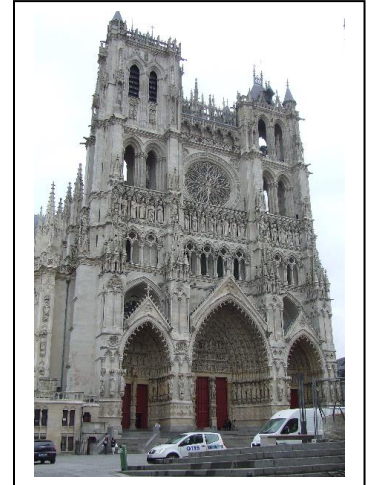
However, later during the day of that same June 29, the Battalion boarded a train to transport it to an *Army Rest Camp* at Izel Le Hameau. Excerpt from 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 29, 1918: *The Battalion arrived at 10. p.m. and found everything in readiness for it, hot meals, etc. The billets were only fair, but in a clean and sanitary condition. Even so, it was likely preferable to what had just been left behind.*

On July 15 the Battalion and Private MacPherson began the return journey in the direction of Arras, to halt in the smaller community of Dainville on that same day. The Battalion was now to spend a week there – but not Private MacPherson.

On July 16 he and a second *other rank* were to proceed to Corps Headquarters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again private MacPherson found himself seconded as a clerk at the Canadian Corps Headquarters with which unit he had been serving only some two months prior, perhaps by this time centred on Molliens-Vidame to the west of Amiens. What his duties were now to be is not documented among his papers; however, this was now to be a period when the Canadian Corps was about to need a great deal of organizational work.



A large offensive was now in the offing – in fact, several large offensives were now in the offing. The Canadian Corps was to be transported in only a matter of a few days by rail, by motor transport and on foot, from the sectors in the area of Arras to the forward area to the east of the city of Amiens to where the Germans had advanced some four months earlier, during their offensive of the spring of that year.

(Right above: *The venerable gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had apparently been able see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – photograph from 2007(?)*)

Not only was that transfer to commence at the end of July and beginning of August – the opening day of the offensive was to be August 8\* – but within ten days the Corps was to begin to retrace its steps in order to return to the *Arras Front* for a second attack to begin on August 25.

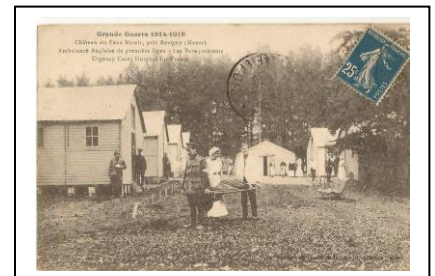
*\*By that date the Canadian Corps Headquarters was based at Dury, just south of Amiens.*

There was a great deal to be planned and it is not unlikely that in some way or manner Private MacPherson's tasks and duties at the Canadian General Staff Headquarters were related to these upcoming events. They likely had also commenced to be related to the second offensive cited above, but if so, for Private MacPherson, they were now to be abruptly curtailed.

On August 25\* he was admitted into the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance at Wanquetin, a dozen or so kilometres to the west of Arras and adjacent to Dainville. There his problem was diagnosed as being two-fold: dermatitis and syphilis.

(Right: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

*\*By this time the Canadian Corps Headquarters had once again moved in order to conduct the fighting on the new front along the Arras-Cambrai axis. At first it was briefly at Hautecloque after which it was transferred to Noyelle-Vion, both communities to the west of Arras.*

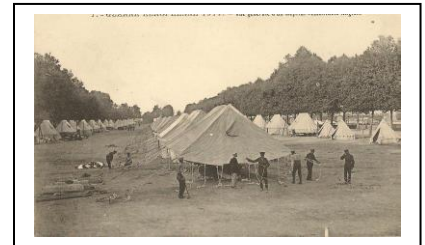


*Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the complete War Diaries of the Canadian Corps General Staff are not yet available on line, rendering precise information on the whereabouts of this unit difficult to provide.*

From the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance Private MacPherson was forwarded on the same August 25 to either the 7<sup>th</sup> or the 33<sup>rd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station, both at Ligny St-Flochel, further to the west again.

From there on the morrow he was conveyed by the 29<sup>th</sup> Ambulance Train to the 51<sup>st</sup> (Southern) General Hospital at Étaples before, on the next day again, then continuing on to the 51<sup>st</sup> General Hospital, also at Étaples, a facility which specialized in venereal complaints.

*(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)*



*(Right: Étaples Military Cemetery is the largest British burial ground in France; just fewer than twelve-thousand five-hundred dead of the Great War lie within its bounds, of which over eleven-hundred Canadian – including a number of fallen of the Newfoundland Regiment who were not Canadian at the time\*. The majority by far died in one of the many medical facilities established during the conflict in or in the vicinity of Étaples. – photograph from 2010)*



His condition from that point on was to deteriorate, and by November 2 the medical staff were considering him, now also suffering from pneumonia, as being *dangerously ill*.

*\*The CWGC (Commonwealth War Graves Commission) records Newfoundlanders lost in both World Wars, even those having served with British forces, as Canadians, despite the fact that from 1907 until 1949, Newfoundland was a separate Dominion of the British Empire/ Commonwealth.*

The son of Samuel Joseph MacPherson, a moulder with the *Consolidated Foundry Company* in St. John's, and of Sarah MacPherson (née *Ryan*)\*, of 11, Atlantic Avenue in St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least William-Henry and to Charlotte.

*\*The couple married June 17, 1883.*

From September 16 of 1915 until June 1, 1917 – when he declared himself as...*needy of the money while in Rouen...*, he had allocated a monthly eight dollars from his pay to a Mr. Jack McCoubrey of 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue East in Calgary.

Private MacPherson was reported by the 51<sup>st</sup> General Hospital at Étaples as having *died of sickness, broncho-pneumonia*, on November 7, 1918.

Charles Joseph MacPherson had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-five years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, November 9, 1889 (from attestation papers and the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Private Charles Joseph MacPherson 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 23, 2023.