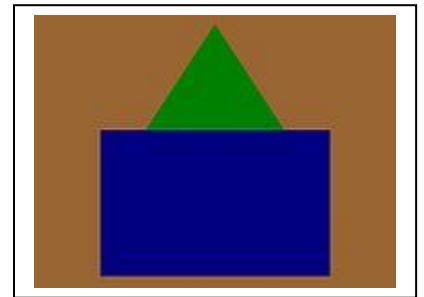


**Private Alexander Manuel (Number 201969) of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Central Ontario*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on *Vimy Ridge*.**

**(Right: *The image of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Central Ontario) shoulder-patch is from the Revolvly. Website*)**



**(continued)**

His occupations prior to military service recoded as those of both *artist* and *designer*, Alexander Manuel has left little behind him of the story of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. The 1911 Census documents the Manuel family, his parents, two siblings and seventeen-year old Alexander, as living at 277, Christie Street in Toronto, while a passenger list of the SS *Kyle* likely records the father – but no other family member – as crossing from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on October 11, 1910.

The next records date from the year 1915 when a medical report shows that Alexander Manuel enlisted on October 29. On that day he presented himself to a (the?) Toronto Recruiting Depot where he underwent the above-mentioned medical examination, a procedure which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. He then attested.

Three days later, on November 1, the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a close when an officer of the 95<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion, Major Charles Mitchell, declared – on paper – that...Alexander Manuel...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day.../ *certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*. It was also on that day that Private Manuel was *taken on strength* by – and on the pay-list of - Major Mitchell's unit, the above-said 95<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion\*.

*\*One source has him becoming a member of the Battalion's Fife and Drum Band.*

Training for the 95<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be undertaken at the *Canadian National Exhibition Grounds* in Toronto, it by this time having become a Canadian Army establishment, *Exhibition Camp*. Apart from its other facilities the camp also boasted a hospital where it was that Private Manuel was admitted on January 24, 1916, for treatment to a case of tonsillitis. Five days later, on January 29, he was discharged from there back *to duty*.

Training continued for Private Manuel and his fellow recruits until well into May of that year. Towards the end of the month the thirty-six officers and one-thousand sixty-one other ranks entrained in Toronto and journeyed to the east-coast port of Halifax from where the unit was to take ship to the United Kingdom.

The vessel was a requisitioned *White Star Line* vessel, by then His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* which Private Manuel's Battalion embarked onto on May 31. The unit was not to travel alone; one of the largest ships afloat at the time, *Olympic* was also to carry several other Canadian military units on this crossing: the 88<sup>th</sup>, 89<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup> and 99<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the Number 7 Siege Battery.



(Right below: *Sister-ship to Britannic – that vessel to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean a month later, in November of 1916 – and also to the ill-fated Titanic, HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor in the company of HM Hospital Ship Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay, Island of Lemnos, in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

(continued)

**Olympic** sailed of June 2, 1916, to complete the Atlantic crossing in six days. From dockside on June 8 the 95<sup>th</sup> Battalion was transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, by this time established in the English county of Kent in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone. There Private Manuel would remain to train with his unit for almost eight months.

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



During this period his Battalion was to provide re-enforcements for a number of other units. It was to go no further than the United Kingdom and, its usefulness terminated, was disbanded in July of 1917\*.

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

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

Perhaps the first signs of his eventual transfer from training to *active service* on the Continent came on January 24 of the New Year, 1917, when Private Manuel was posted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion (*Central Ontario*) (also referred to in his papers as the 5<sup>th</sup> *Canadian Training Battalion*) at *Camp Bramshott*, another large Canadian military establishment, this one located in the southern county of Hampshire\*.

*\*In fact what by then remained of his entire 95<sup>th</sup> Battalion was absorbed on that date by the newly-formed 5<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion. As seen above, the 95<sup>th</sup> was disbanded some seven months later on July 17 of 1917.*

Having been *taken on strength* by his new unit on January 25, Private Manuel was now to train for some four weeks at *Bramshott* in preparation for his further transfer to France. To this end he was again transferred, on February 17, and on paper on this occasion, to a formation already in service on the *Western Front*, the 20<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Central Ontario*).



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

(continued)

Some three days subsequent to this bureaucratic transfer came the real thing: on or about the night of February 21-22, 1917, Private Manuel crossed the English Channel – likely through the English south-coast port of Southampton and the French industrial port-city of Le Havre – to report *to duty* to the nearby Canadian Base Depot on that February 22.

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



One of seventy-six re-enforcements to arrive at the Base Depot on that day, it was to be only some forty-eight hours afterwards that he was one of seven-hundred seventy-one despatched, on February 24, to seek out his new unit.

February 27, 1917, was a day on which the fighting companies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Central Ontario) were in trenches in front-line trenches in the *Thelus Sector*, adjacent to *Vimy Ridge*. The Battalion War Diary entry for that day reports no particular infantry action but a great deal of artillery as well as aerial activity.

It is perhaps not too surprising, therefore, that the officer diarist did not remark upon the arrival of Private Manuel’s re-enforcement draft from Le Havre. These men, in any case, would have reported *to duty* in the rear area which – once again according to the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist – was also receiving attention on that day from the German guns.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had sailed from Montreal in May of 1915 on board His Majesty’s Transport *Megantic* and had arrived in the British naval port facility of Plymouth-Devonport on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of that month. From there it had been taken by train to *West Sandling Camp*, a subsidiary of *Shorncliffe* (see further above).

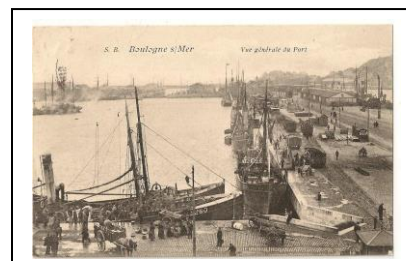
The Battalion was a component of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Division, itself an element of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division which was being formed at *Shorncliffe* at the time prior to its transfer to active service on the Continent, a move which came about in the middle of September of that 1915.

As with the large majority of the units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had crossed the Dover Straits through nearby Folkestone: On September 14, it had...*left West Sandling Camp, marching to Folkestone, embarking at 10.45 p.m. After a wet, rough trip, arrived at Boulogne, France, at 1 a.m.\** (Excerpt from 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1915)



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

*\*The journey-time was even shorter than it may seem from reading above, as there is a one-hour time difference between the United Kingdom and France.*





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

(Right below: *The image of the requisitioned cross-Channel steamer Duchess of Argyll, on which the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion crossed to France on the night of September 14-15 of 1915, is from the bing.com/images web-site.*)

Some twenty-four hours later the unit had travelled by train eastward to the area of St-Omer where, having then marched from the railway station, at two o'clock in the morning it had arrived at its billets, the War Diarist remarking that...*The march was very hard on the men. Were not settled in billets till 4 a.m.*



On the following day the Battalion personnel had again marched to further billets in - and in the vicinity of - Eecke in which area it was now to remain before then crossing the Franco-Belgian frontier on September 21.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was now to remain in the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the next eleven months. The sectors for which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was now to assume responsibility were a few kilometres to the south of the already-ravaged medieval city of Ypres, in that part of the line which led towards northern France. In that area its units were to replace British battalions.



(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 little left standing. – from Illustration*)

For the first six months or so of its service on the *Western Front*, the newly-arrived Canadians' neighbour to the south was to be the now-veteran 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. During this period, the autumn of 1915 and the winter of 1915-1916 had been as quiet as they ever were in and about the *Ypres Salient*\*.

*\*In the summer and fall of 1914, the Germans invaded and occupied most of Belgium, where they were to remain until September of 1918. Only the very small area of Ypres (today leper) and to the south-west of the city as far as the coast remained under Belgian – and Allied – control.*

Thus the unit had had the time to become acquainted with the rigours, routines – and at least some of the perils – of life in the trenches of the Great War\*.



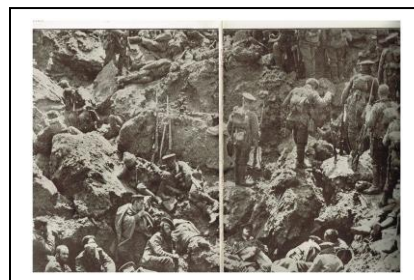
(Right above: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions (see below) somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and the less visible British rifles – from Illustration*)

***\*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 possibly suggested in the preceding format and the troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.***

**It was not to be until early April of 1916, more than six months following its arrival on the Continent, that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation.**

**It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of March, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The role of the newly-arrived Canadian formation had then been to capitalize on the presumed British successes, to hold and to consolidate the newly-won territory.**



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

**However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the often putrid weather which was to turn the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and then a resolute German defence, had greeted the Canadian newcomers who were to begin to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4.**

**Two weeks later the Germans had won back their lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.**

**The *Action of the St. Eloi Craters* had not been a happy experience for the novice Canadians although it would appear, from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary reports and those of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, that its – the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion's - participation in the affair had been minimal. There was a great deal of *standing to*, and working-parties and carrying-parties had been supplied on a great number of occasions; however while the unit had been in the forward area early on during the *Action*, little infantry action and few casualties appear to have been reported.**

**On April 4 the entire 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had been relieved from the front-line positions and had been withdrawn to the area of Dickebusch – to return with the Brigade on April 8 for an attack, for which the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been held back in reserve - and on April 13 the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had withdrawn further, to *Camp K* in the vicinity of Reninghelst.**

**(continued)**

Six weeks following the episode at St-Éloi there had then been the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*. This had involved principally the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division\* but a number of other units from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions, since the situation at times was to become critical, had also subsequently played a role.

*\*The Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. However, unlike its two predecessors, it was formed on the Continent, some of its units having already been on active service there for months. Others did not arrive until the early weeks of 1916, thus it was not until March of the year 1916 that the Division was capable of assuming responsibility for any sector. When it eventually did, it was thrust into the south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

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



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

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



Sir Julien Byng's\* hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal, poorly supported by artillery and badly co-ordinated, had proved a costly venture for the Canadians who were to lose heavily on that June 3.

*\*The British Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps.*

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



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

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to play a leading part in the action at *Mount Sorrel* there having been only a single occasion on which a Company had been sent forward in support . During the time of this operation it was to serve in the area of *The Bluff*, *Bedford House* and the remnants of the village of *Dickebusch*.

(continued)



While the unit's War Diarist was well aware of events...*to the left*...and while he also reports increased artillery activity at times falling on his Battalion's positions, his unit was not to be involved in the infantry activity at *Mount Sorrel*.

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



The confrontation had lasted eleven days, having culminated in the Canadian attack, on this second occasion well-planned and well-supported by the artillery, of June 13. Both sides, apart from a small German gain at *Hooge* village, had ended up in much the positions of June 2, the only difference being that the cemeteries were now that much fuller.

After the exertions of *Mount Sorrel*, any infantry activity was now to be on a local level and limited to regular patrols and sporadic raids, and most casualties were to be due to artillery and to sniping.



(Right: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres: the area today is protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature.* – photograph from 2014)

During the final days of the spring of 1916 the fury of the affair at *Mount Sorrel* had progressively abated and that summer was to be quiet – on many occasions the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of the day was to commence with a synopsis of the weather. Patrols there had been and some units had mounted the occasional raid; a perusal of the unit's War Diary entries of that period, however, show only a single such action had been undertaken by the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion: on June 28, an unsuccessful attempt to bomb enemy positions had resulted in two *killed in action*, three *wounded*, one *missing in action* and little else.

The Battalion personnel were also kept busy in ways other than avoiding the German artillery-fire and his marksmen's bullets: repairing gun-fire damage and one's own wire - while cutting and destroying the enemy's - carrying myriad supplies and ammunition, constructing positions and communications, undergoing instruction in the newly-arriving Lewis Gun and the British-made Lee-Enfield rifle, bombing (*bombs being hand-grenades*) courses, the use of the latest gas-masks, routine drills - including the correct way to salute, inspections from less-important persons in the forward area - and from those more-important in areas further to the rear - receiving lectures on subjects ranging from aircraft recognition to venereal disease (how to *avoid* it) to '*how to say in French*'\*...

\**Today this part of the country speaks Flemish rather than French.*

(continued)



(Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for August 24, 1916) *Fine all day, cool & good for marching. – Bn. left Camp at 6 a.m. and marched with Bde to Steenvoorde. – Bn went into billets South of Steenvoorde. Casualties on march Nil. Arrived in billets at 11.30 a.m...*

An excerpt from the Diary entry of the morrow shows that by then the Battalion personnel had surely been becoming aware – in some small way - of what was lying in store for the unit and for the entire Canadian Corps: *P.T. was carried out during morning & lectures given to all ranks on operations on SOMME.*



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

Three more days of marching to different billets in different communities – on the way having received those afore-mentioned Lee-Enfield rifles – had then faced the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion before it had arrived at the location of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Training Centre at and in the vicinity of La Panne. On August 29 those new rifles – rapid loading and visual training thereof – were first on that first day's agenda.

Then it was time to board another train: (Excerpt from 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 4, 1916) *Advance party left for ARDRUICQ at 5. p.m. with transport for entraining. Part of Bn. left rendezvous at 6.45 p.m. as per O.O. attached\*. Entraining completed by 10 p.m.*

#### *\*Operational Order*

At six o'clock on the following morning, its weary passengers having spent an uncomfortable night in transit, the trained had pulled into the railway station at Auxi-le-Château. Billeted each night in communities on the route, the Battalion had then begun to march for the next four days to the *Brickfields Camp* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert – and also to the German artillery.



The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was now about to enter the cauldron of *the Somme*.

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

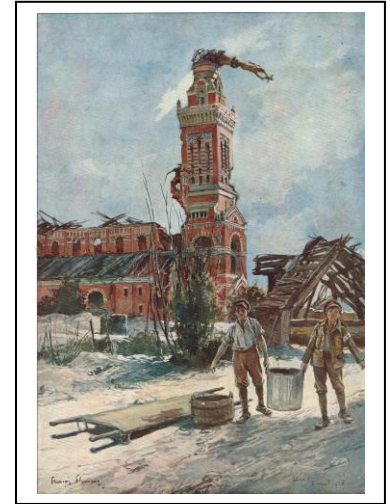
The unit had arrived at *Brickfields Camp* just after noon on September 9 and had been ordered at first into the nearby *Ancre River* for a bath before having been issued bivouacs. Bivouacs are improvised shelters and, as may be imagined, are most uncomfortable when it rains: On that afternoon it had done so.

(continued)

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

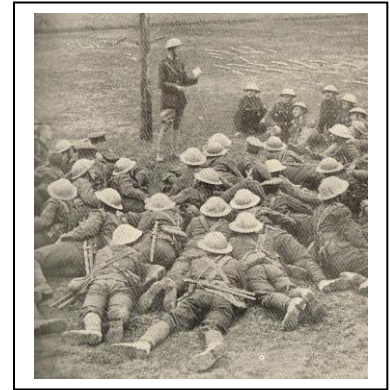
On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so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

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



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

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette, September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)



On the way from *Brickfields* to his Battalion's new billets on September 10, the Officer Commanding the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion and his Adjutant had paused in the vicinity of Bray-sur-Somme to witness the demonstration of a new war machine. Originally to be called a land-ship, for secrecy purposes it had been given a code-name: *tank*.



(Right above: *The French caption translated reads: A tank at rest in the rear area: the photograph was ostensibly taken during the First Battle of the Somme. – from Le Miroir*)

For the next three days, when the weather gods had permitted it, training had proceeded for the upcoming attack of September 15. On the eve of the offensive, September 14... *The final preparations were made for the attack. Bombers were sent forward to establish an advanced dump in our front line. Scouts were used to tape out our front line, C.T's (communication trenches) and flanks... Bn. left ALBERT at 10.15 p.m.... Coys (Companies) were loaded with stores to be taken forward in attack\**. (Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

(continued)

***\*The following is a list of equipment issued to the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, also of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, on September 10 when the Brigade was ordered into the line to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division. Each man carried with him apart from his personal equipment...2 MILLS bombs, 2 sandbags, and two extra bandoliers of ammunition. 4 LEWIS guns\* with 3,000 rounds SAA (small-arms ammunition) were taken into each sub-sector, 4 Colt and 1 Vickers machine gun at Battalion H.Q.***

***\*A light machine-gun requiring a crew of two***

***(Extract from the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Brigade Operational Order Number 70)***

***(Further excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1916) The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Bde will capture, consolidate, and hold a portion of the main objective...including Strong Point at SUGAR FACTORY...***

***(Excerpt from the same 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary, but from the entry for September 15, 1916) In conjunction with our Fourth and the French Armies, the Canadian Corps attacked the German position. The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Bde. took part in the attack in conjunction with the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Bde. on our left, and the 15<sup>th</sup> Division (British) on our right.***

***(Right: After the fighting of September 15-16 at Courcellette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir)***



**At half past six on the morning of September 15 the Canadian and British artillery had begun its barrage; six minutes later the first attacking troops – the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion among them – had then begun to move forward, the first objective having been taken eleven minutes later.**

**In contrast to the efforts of - and despite the sacrifices of - the other attacking forces on that day, the general offensive of September 15, 1915, was to be yet another horrendous experience on *the Somme*. Perhaps the sole exception to the litany of failures of the day would be the advance undertaken by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division whose objective had been the village of Courcellette and the adjacent sugar factory. The 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade had taken the sugar factory that morning and Courcellette was to fall to the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade that evening.**

***(Right: The village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 12017)***



**Having consolidated its newly-won positions, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had remained *in situ* on the following day and had resisted any and all enemy endeavours to dislodge it. It was to remain where it was until five o'clock the next morning when it had been relieved by the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders.**



The Battalion's success, however, was to come at a price: the estimated casualties incurred by the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion during this two-day operation had been fifty *killed in action* and two-hundred sixty *wounded*.

(Right below: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)

The High Command had by this time planned a further attack in the same area – it was to be known as the *Battle of the Thiepval Ridge* – which was to last for the three days of September 25-27. And to take the place in the line of the infantry battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division for this next occasion were to be some of the newly-arrived Canadian troops of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division.



Many of the units which had fought in the offensive of September 15 and the two days following, were now to receive a respite. However, billets had been needed in the proximity of Albert to accommodate the incoming troops; thus those not to be fighting were going to be ordered to march into the rear area – still close enough, however, to be recalled in a few days' time.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been one of those ordered to march. On September 18, only the day after its retirement from the field, it had begun to march away from Albert: Harponville; Val de Maison – for two days and where re-enforcements had reported *to duty*; Pernois – there for two days of training; Val de Maison for a further day; Harponville once again.

Finally on September 25 the unit had ended the day in bivouacs at *Tara Valley Camp*, this locale also in the vicinity of the town of Albert.

The *Battle of the Thiepval Ridge* had still been ongoing at this point and on September 26 the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered up into the reserve trenches and from there, in the late afternoon, further up into support positions. There the unit had then remained sheltering from the enemy gun-fire until almost mid-night on the following day when it had been relieved and withdrawn to *Tara Valley Camp*.

At *the Somme* there was no real respite: Having remained in that somewhat dubious shelter provided by the trenches, during this short period a further forty-seven *killed in action* or *wounded* had been added to the Battalion's losses. Even after relief, the return to the *Camp* had resulted in casualties.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to be in the rear area for long. Having been re-called to the front-line trenches close to the ruins of Courcellette on the night of September 28-29 it was to work at consolidating the newly-won area. While there, on October 1, the unit had been ordered to attack a part of the German defensive system known as *Regina Trench*.



(continued)



(Preceding page: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

Despite a heavy opening bombardment, the German defences, particularly their machine-gunners, had played havoc with the attacking troops. The attack, even though some ground had been gained, had possibly been not been very well thought out, at least not to the War Diarist's mind:

*A peculiar characteristic of this operation was that our infantry had to advance four hundred yards in the open, then left in plain view of the enemy & dig in. This would have been practically impossible had it not been for the cover afforded by shell holes. (Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for October 1, 1916)*



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

At times isolated in its new positions because of the units on the flanks not having advanced, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been obliged to create new defensive positions. Work had continued for the following day and night, hindered by heavy rain. Mercifully the enemy had appeared not to appreciate the precariousness of the Canadian situation and the intensity of his artillery activity had tapered off as the hours had passed.



Nonetheless, by the time of its relief during the late evening of October 3, the War Diarist's estimates of casualties were to be documented as seventeen *killed in action* and one-hundred twenty *wounded*.

(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 morrow, at mid-day, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion had marched through Albert and further, to billets at Bouzincourt where it had arrived four hours later. This had been the first stage of the unit's withdrawal from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

It had subsequently passed to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of Lens, on the way having been joined by two-hundred forty-one re-enforcements, both officers and other ranks - but still insufficient to make good the Battalion's losses.



(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*)

(continued)

On October 14 the unit had marched into its destination, Haillicourt – in the rear area some twenty kilometres to the north-west of the city and mining-centre of Lens - where for three days the troops had organized and cleaned their equipment and also themselves, baths and clean clothing having been a priority.

That autumn of 1916 and the winter that was to follow, much of it spent by the Battalion behind the lines in the areas of Bully-Grenay and – further to the west again - of Calonne and then Bruay and Auchel, were to be of relative calm, thus having allowed the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion – and many other units - to return to the everyday grind of trench warfare; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a most welcome change\*.

*\*As the Canadians were withdrawn from the Somme, the last doing so towards the end of November, they were ordered northwards into sectors comprising some thirty kilometres of the Front, from the town of Béthune in the north to the outskirts of the city of Arras in the south.*

*This area had been the major coal-mining region of the country, providing for some seventy per cent of the nation's needs, and most of the communities in the area had been dependent on this resource. During the Great War it was, logically, considered a vital area and it was fought over for much of the conflict, the destruction and the re-location of the population of course resulting in a shortage of the coal vital for the country's industries, war-oriented and otherwise.*



(Right above: *As it was with all the communities within artillery range of the Western Front during the Great War, the town of Béthune was reduced to little more than rubble. – from a vintage post-card*)

There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids undertaken by both sides. The medical facilities during this period had been kept much more busy by cases of sickness and, particularly, by dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.

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

Thus the time had passed for the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, much of it in training and instruction. It had not been until the middle of February that this routine was to begin to change when the unit had been ordered southwards into the *Thelus Sector* some few kilometres to the north of the city of Arras.



The transfer had been made on February 11 and 12, at the end of which two-day period the Battalion was again to be back in trenches of the forward area and, after those weeks of calm, soon noticing the violence of the ongoing artillery duels.

This first tour had been a week in duration, the Battalion then having retired to the back area of Écoivres on February 19. After five days of parades, of drills and of other training, it had in its turn been sent to relieve the 18<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion back in the *Thelus Sector*. And this was where it was still serving on February 27, 1917, when Private Mansfield had reported *to duty* with his new unit.



(Right above: *Nine Elms Military Cemetery, Thélus, within the bounds of which lie more than seven-hundred dead, French, British and Commonwealth, just fewer than one-hundred fifty of whom remain unidentified – photograph from 1917*)

\* \* \* \* \*

It was now the month of March, the winter was coming to an end and the British, although it was not entirely to their liking, were making plans for a spring campaign. Meanwhile Private Manuel's Battalion was regularly in and out of the *Thelus Sector* until March 9 when there was a six-day training period the Bois des Alleux.

It was during this period that the only metaphoric smudge appeared on Private Manuel's otherwise immaculate record: He is documented as having forfeited three days' pay – three dollars plus thirty cents Field Allowance in total – for having been...*Absent from Tatoon Roll Call 8.30 pm to 9.45 pm 11/3/17...*while under the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Training Company.

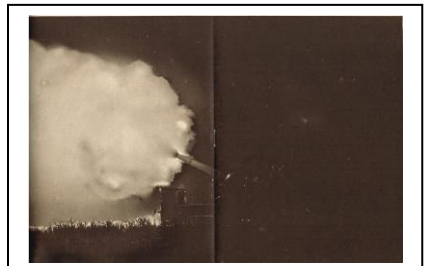
There followed a further period in support positions in the *Thelus Sector* before special training sessions took hold once more. It was, of course, to be not only the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion involved but the entire Canadian Corps, the infantry units thus being withdrawn in sequence to the rear areas, there to partake in Canadian-led training.

Among these exercises were to be some novel developments: the use of captured enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

For Private Manuel and the other personnel of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion, this all began to take place on March 22 at Bois des Alleux. There was a change of venue, to *Yukon Camp*, on March 25 but the training was to continue up until the night of April 3-4 when the unit moved forward once more into the front line in the *Thelus Sector*.

The time that Private Manuel and his comrades-in-arms had previously spent there had not been just totally fortuitous. It was from the *Thelus Sector* that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, thus the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade and the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion were to pass to the attack a few days hence.

(continued)





The artillery had also been laying plans during this period and in the days prior to the attack the barrages had been growing in intensity. The German riposte, on the other hand, was reported by the Battalion War Diary on April 7 as follows: *Little retaliation came from hostile artillery, and our Observers report enemy T.M. (trench mortar) fire as nil.*

On the other hand the same report continues...*During the night our guns of all calibre pounded the enemy's defences, searched roads, and shelled back areas.*

(Preceding page: *A heavy British artillery piece spews its venom into the night sky in the days before the Battle of Arras. – from Illustration*)

April 8, the eve of the offensive, was spent in final preparations: carrying-parties brought forward as much ammunition and as many supplies as possible; wire\* was cut; jumping-off trenches were completed; surplus stores and equipment were placed in dug-outs to the rear; and the Battalion Headquarters was moved at eleven o'clock on that evening into one of those many tunnels about which so much has been written.

*\*Even friendly wire was destroyed so as to afford passage to the attacking troops.*

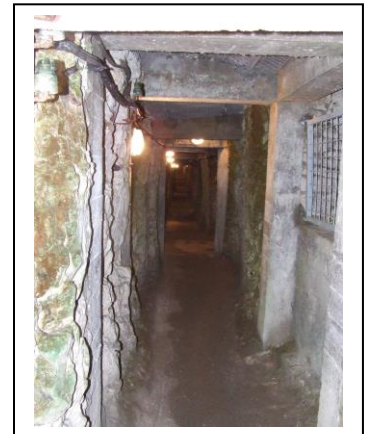
On April 9 of that 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was to be the so-called *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive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



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

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

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

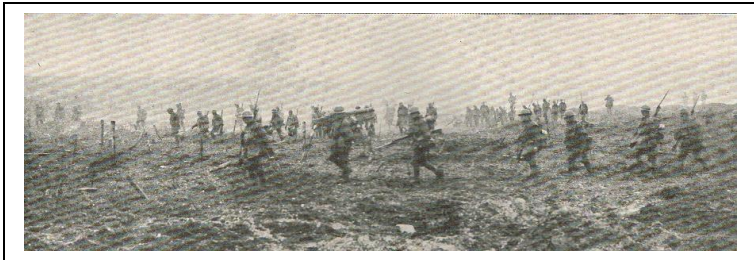


On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge\**, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

*\*It must be said 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: Canadian troops of either 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 – official Canadian photograph from Illustration)**



It had been to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions that the responsibility had been given for the taking of the *Ridge* itself. Far to the right, in the direction of the village of Roclincourt was to be the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, while sandwiched between it and the two Divisions on *Vimy Ridge* was Private Manuel's 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, plus a British Brigade, in the area of the village of Thélus.

**(Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917) *Our barrage opened at 5.30 am, and at the same times the Battalions forming the attack advanced. 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion supplied two companies as Moppers up to the 1<sup>st</sup> wave, No. 1 Coy being on the right in the rear of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and No. 2 Coy on the left in the rear of the 19<sup>th</sup> Bn. – Prior to the opening of the barrage all troops were assembled in their positions in “jumping-off” trenches, the foremost of which was 10 yds in front of our wire, fortunately no men were discovered by the enemy, the movement having been carried out absolutely in silence.***

***After the opening of the barrage our troops advanced under its cover, receiving very little M.G. fire, no rifle fire, and for seven minutes no Artillery retaliation...***

***At 5.33 am...our troops were in the enemy's front line and...at 5.38 occupied his support line. At 6.07 am the third line...was occupied, and 10 minutes later our troops were in the black objective.***

It had apparently been arranged for a squadron of eight tanks to support the Battalion's efforts in the village of Thélus. Unfortunately they were unable to advance and were all put out of action, the War Diarist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion subsequently facetiously writing that...*they served, however, one purpose, namely, to draw Artillery fire to themselves which otherwise might have been used upon the Infantry.* (Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)



While there had been some furious resistance in places, the German defence was surprisingly under par, and his response to the Canadian success was muted. His artillery was subsequently weak and his counter-attacks few in number and lacking in determination. The High Command, perhaps expecting a stronger enemy reaction, had already decided, once the objectives had been taken, to consolidate the newly-won positions rather than to continue the advance. And so it was: the Canadians now began to dig in\*.

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

*\*In fairness it should be said the atrocious weather and ground conditions had made it almost impossible to move the artillery or the necessary ammunition and equipment forward in order to continue the advance. It has also been suggested that the Germans were prepared to retreat several kilometres into previously-prepared positions, defences which later were to make further attacks very difficult – and costly.*

Private Manuel spent some of the night of April 9-10 in a bivouac in one of the positions he had helped to capture on that day – he worked during the rest of the night. Further to the left, in the sector stormed by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, the German were still occupying two high points, ‘*the Pimple*’ and *Hill 145* - on which the Canadian National Memorial would later be built - but these too were soon to fall.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion now took the time to count the cost: the War Diarist reported that during the attack of April 9 there had been six *killed in action*, fifty-six *wounded* and thirty-six *missing in action*. He also once again reported that...*All reports show the uselessness of the Tanks. They stuck and only drew fire...*

*(Right below: Wounded being evacuated from the forward area by a narrow-gauge railway still in the process of construction – from Illustration)*

That April 10 was in sharp contrast to the first day of the offensive. It was spent digging in and bringing up a number of 18-pounder field guns and 4.5-inch howitzers. While, as has been seen, there was still fighting on the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division Front, none was to be reported by Private Manuel’s Battalion which ended its day relieving a British unit in the line.



This work of a defensive nature was to continue for the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion until April 14 when the entire 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade was ordered relieved and was withdrawn into reserve in the area of Bois des Alleux, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion into huts at Le Pendu.



*(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 headbands – tumps – was an idea adapted and adopted from the North American aboriginal peoples – from Le Miroir)*

It was to be a week later before further orders were received. The enemy, having relinquished the high ground on April 9, had withdrawn some three kilometres in front of the Canadians who were now deciding how to build on their success. To that end the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved into the forward area on April 21-22.

By this time, however, the enemy had recovered from his reverse and Private Manuel’s unit was received by heavy enemy artillery activity; on the 25<sup>th</sup> there was even a counter-attack, it and the aforementioned artillery fire hindering much of the work that had been planned.

(continued)

During that week – April 21-26 - the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion was moved back and forth to the front lines but in fact no further infantry action was ordered. On April 26, the unit moved again to the rear and into Divisional Reserve in the vicinity of Aux Reitz (today *La Targette*).

The tour in reserve did not start off well: scheduled for a bath, only a third of the Battalion had passed through when the water supply failed. However, on April 29 the job was completed and on May 1 the War Diarist could include in his daily report that...*Battalion inspected in am at 11 o'clock by G.O.C. 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade who complimented the men on their cleanliness and steadiness.* (Excerpt from 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for May 1, 1917)

Apparently it was to be sunny and warm during these few days in reserve and the Battalion took advantage on two occasions to have a half-day of sports - how Private Manuel fared is not recorded. Drills, clothing and church parades, and a march-past for the aforementioned General-Officer-Commanding the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade were also part and parcel of it all.

In the early afternoon of May 2 the Battalion was on the move to the forward area once more, on this occasion to the area of Roclincourt, this community at perhaps five kilometres to the south of the village of Thélus.

The unit was established in the support area by seven o'clock that evening and at least one company was by that time reportedly enjoying the luxury of its field kitchen.



(Right above: *The graves of nine-hundred sixteen Commonwealth dead and of four German soldiers are to be found in Roclincourt Military Cemetery – photograph from 2017*)

On the following day, in the sectors just to the east of Thélus, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division and the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division were in action and the 1<sup>st</sup> Division captured the community of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle\* – which the Germans were days later to win back (see below). There was apparently no infantry action on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Front to report on that day although the Battalion that morning had been ordered to keep the...*Battalion stretcher-bearers and a Burial Party of 1 Officer and 50 O.R. in readiness to report...at a moment's notice.* (Excerpt from 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for May 3, 1917)

*\*Often referred to in Canadian sources as just Fresnoy – except that it is not the only community of that name, a second being only some twenty-kilometres to the north. Givenchy is another such situation, Givenchy-en-Gohelle in the shadow of Vimy Ridge, and Givenchy-les-la-Bassé being to the north. Canadian troops fought there in 1915.*

On May 4 the Battalion personnel was kept busy...*at work cleaning out dugouts and preparing better accommodation in the area. During the afternoon large parties out salvaging all sorts of stores & equipment in the field. It is surprising the quantity of arms, ammunition of various kinds, tools, equipment and all sorts of stores, that are lying about.* (Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for May 4, 1917)

There was no infantry action – or any other – recorded for that day.

(continued)

The following day, May 5, was much the same, everything... *Reported quiet on our front.*

On May 6 Private Manuel's unit moved further forward, into close support and on the next day, May 7, three of the Battalion's four Companies moved into the trenches. However, although the enemy artillery was reported as being active, Private Manuel was not the target and all remained quiet in front of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

The community of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle, to the right of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion positions, was the objective of a German counter-attack at three-thirty in the morning of May 8, an effort which drove the occupying British and Canadian forces back in some confusion. This created problems for the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion as German troops were reported as having infiltrated through the defences to the unit's right.



(Right above: *Vimy Ridge – the ground attacked by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division - as seen from the German side of the lines, from the areas of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle and Arleux-en-Gohelle: The Canadian National Memorial stands on the Ridge about one third of the way along from the left in the image. – photograph from 1915*)

The Battalion was put on alert and troops were organized to deal with a possible attack which, finally, never came to be.

Also early on that same morning, at about half-past seven, a small raid by Numbers 1 and 3 Companies succeeded in entering the German front line before being driven out by an enemy artillery barrage. Those involved were able to return to the Battalion's positions without further incident. In turn, a German counter-attack which had been reported to be massing at about eleven-thirty, was broken up by Canadian and British artillery fire.

Electronic communication was still in its infancy in the days of the Great War and buried cables were of prime importance. But the opposing artilleries were also aware of this and the field telephones were as often as not *hors de combat*, their wires having been blown to shreds. Runners were often used but their life expectancy was not long and it was all too easy to become lost at night-time or in the confusion of battle.

The situation was often a shambles.

Private Manuel's Battalion's experience on the night of May 8-9, 1917, illustrates the results of these difficulties. (Excerpts from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entries for May 8 and 9, 1917)

*Order received at 1.45 pm for Counter attack to be made 7 pm...*

*From 3.50 to 4 pm heavy Boche (German) barrage...*

*At 4.30 pm orders cancelling Counter attack received.*

*At 9.00 pm orders received to make Counter attack at 2 am on 9<sup>th</sup>... (These orders were issued to certain units as late as 11.00 pm on May 8)*



**Commanding Officer and Adjutant moved forward to establish Headquarters...at 11.30 pm. Great trouble with communication as wires remain in only a few minutes and visual Signalling impossible. Runner slow.**

**Commanding Officer and Adjutant arrived at advanced Headquarters at 12.30 am and found message re attack at 2 am not delivered – Orders at once issued to two Coys of 20<sup>th</sup> Bn. to get into position for jumping off, and a duplicate sent by other runners five minutes later. At 1.40 am 1<sup>st</sup> runner to “D” Coy 21<sup>st</sup> Bn., returned saying he could not find the Coy. At 1.55 am runners sent to “D” Coy, 21<sup>st</sup> Bn., and “A” and “C” Coys returned saying that they could not find the Coys.**

**At 1.58 am, Major Raymond, “C” Coy, 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, sent message that he was the only Company in position, that he would extend his right to keep touch with Devons (Devonshire Regiment) and swing up with them to form a defensive flank, but could not attack with his Company alone – He was instructed to do this.**

**Further messages were sent out to two Coys of 20<sup>th</sup> Bn and 19<sup>th</sup> Bn. and ordered to prepare to attack. Barrage came down at 2 am, enemy replying at 2.7 am. Our barrage stopped at 2.50 am. At 3.35 am runners reports that they could not find “A” & “C” Coys, 20<sup>th</sup> Bn, and at 3.45 am that they could not find “D” Coy, 21<sup>st</sup> Bn - ...**

**At 3.55 am one Coy 19<sup>th</sup> Bn ordered to move forward – At 4.40 am he reported he had moved up...but owing to no support on his flanks had moved back...**

**At...(this left blank)...am orders issued to “C” Coy, 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion, to move forward...and “A” Coy, 20<sup>th</sup> Bn...to Hun lines...and bomb down them. At...(this left blank)...am these orders were cancelled by Brigade, and the Coys were recalled...**

**...Communication giving great trouble, wires continually going out.**

**20<sup>th</sup> Battalion runners were not used from the forward Headquarters.**

**The operation drew to a close at about five-thirty in the afternoon of May 9 with two Companies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion joining two companies of the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion in close support. Thus the night of May 9-10 was to pass.**

**What the losses had been on that preceding night appears not to have been documented.**

**Early on the morning of May 10, 1917, the other two Companies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved into the trenches in close support in order to relieve those of the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion which had spent the night there. The Battalion’s four Companies were now again posted together as a unit.**

**From thereon, the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diarist relates that the...Day passed quietly. Then, however...At 7.30 pm enemy put over heavy barrage for 45 minutes...Heavy casualties in No. 4 Coy. 3 Officers Killed, one wounded, 9 O.R. Killed, 32 wounded in the one Coy. Casualties in other Coys slight. (Excerpt from the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for May 10, 1917)**

**(continued)**

The official Casualty Report (via *Ancestry.ca*) of Private Manuel states only that he was “KIA” - *West of Vimy*. In fact, this is not correct: the area in which he was serving in the vicinity of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle was to the east of Vimy – of both *Vimy Ridge* and the village of Vimy, the two being about four kilometres apart.



(Right above: *The village of Vimy – occupied by the Germans until only days after the attack on Vimy Ridge – as it was in 1919, just after the conflict – from a vintage post-card*)

The son of Joseph A. (*Alexander?*) Manuel, carpenter, and of Victoria Ann Manuel (née *Parsons*) – to whom as of June 1, 1916, he had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay, and to whom on February 8, 1917, while at *Bramshott*, he had willed his all – his parents originally of Twillingate\* before St. John’s, Newfoundland, before Toronto, he was also younger brother to at least William and Janet.

*\*Married at Twillingate on November 23, 1888 – she from Kite Cove.*

Private Manuel was reported as having been *killed in action* on May 10, 1917, likely by enemy artillery fire.

Alexander Manuel had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-one years and ten months: date of birth in St. John’s Newfoundland, December 29, 1893.

Private Alexander Manuel 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*. Last updated – January 25, 2023.



