



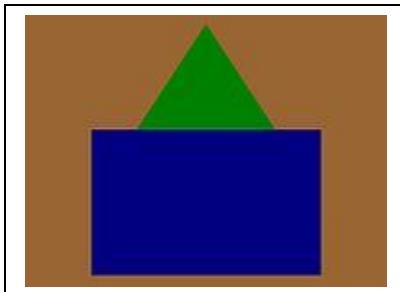
56417 PRIVATE



Private Jocelyn March (Number 57893) of the 20th Battalion (Central Ontario), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Naves Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference V.A.20..

(Right: The image of the 20th Battalion (Central Ontario) shoulder-patch is from the Revolvy. Website)

(continued)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of both *labourer* and *seaman*, Jocelyn March appears to have left little information behind him *a propos* his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. It is likely that it was at some time after the death of his mother in 1894 that his father moved to the province of Manitoba where he was resident at the time of his son's enlistment and where he later died; however, whether Jocelyn or any other of his siblings travelled with their father appears not to be recorded.

On his attestation papers Jocelyn March noted that he had served in the Naval Reserve – in Newfoundland this would have been the Newfoundland Royal Naval reserve – but there are no further details. As the lower age limit was eighteen years, this service in his case could have been at any time after 1901.

All else that may be said with any certainty is that Jocelyn March was in the city of Toronto during the final week of November of 1914, for that is where and when he enlisted.

His first pay records show that it was on November 23 of that year that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private March for his services and that on that day he was temporarily *taken on strength* by a unit of the Canadian Militia, the 20th Regiment (*Halton Rifles*). His first recorded duty was...*Guarding Armouries*. It was indeed a temporary posting and assignment: the same record has him on the pay-list of the 20th Overseas Battalion on November 25*.

**The raison d'être of the Canadian Militia was the defence of the country and its mandate restricted its units to operations within the nation's frontiers. Thus upon the outset of the Great War were created the new Overseas Battalions, expressly for the purpose of fighting in Europe or elsewhere if necessary. Many of these newly-forming battalions were associated with already-existing Militia regiments which recruited on behalf of these nascent formations; in fact, the great majority of Canadian Militia personnel very quickly transferred to the Overseas Battalions.*

The 20th Overseas Battalion, Private March's eventual unit, was to comprise personnel from twelve such Canadian Militia formations.

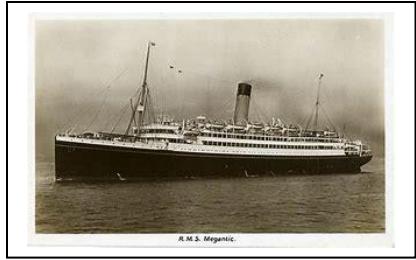
On November 27, Private March presented himself for a medical examination, a procedure which pronounced him as...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. Two days later again he attested.

It was then on December 2 that the formalities of enlistment were brought to a conclusion by the Officer Commanding the 20th Overseas Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel John Alfred Walker Allan, when he declared – on paper – that...*Jocelyn March...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

By this time the Canadian Army had established a large training and administrative centre in the grounds of the *Canadian National Exhibition* in Toronto and it was there and in the vicinity thereof, during the first winter and spring of the Great War that Private March's 20th Battalion (*Central Ontario*) was to undergo much of its training.

This preliminary period of preparation lasted until the first week of May, 1915, at which time the Battalion received its orders to proceed overseas. The unit entrained for the journey to Montreal where on the 14th day of the month it boarded His Majesty's Transport *Megantic* for the trans-Atlantic crossing.

(Right: *The image of the White Star Liner Megantic is from the bing.com/images web-site.*)



Private March's 20th Battalion was not to travel alone. Also taking passage to the United Kingdom on the vessel were the Staff of General Sam Steele of the 2nd Canadian Division, a part of the 2nd Divisional Ammunition Park of the Army Service Corps, and the 2nd Divisional Signal Company of the Canadian Engineers.

Megantic sailed from Montreal on that same May 14 and ten days later, after an uneventful voyage, put into the English south-coast naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport. From there the 20th Battalion once again boarded a train, on this occasion for the cross-country journey to *West Sandling Camp*, on the coast of the county of Kent. It was here that a small British Army camp had been transformed into the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, on the Dover Straits in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone.

It was at *Shorncliffe* that the units now arriving from Canada were congregating to form the 2nd Canadian Division. Here they were to now to train, to organize and to ready themselves for their eventual transfer to the Continent – visible on a clear day across the Straits – and for active service on the *Western Front*.

Thus passed the last few days of that spring and the summer of 1915 for Private March and his 20th Battalion. At the end of August, for no reason to be found in the 20th Battalion War Diary, there was a change of the unit's Commanding Officer, and on September 2 the entire 2nd Canadian Division was inspected by His Majesty the King.

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



The 20th Battalion which now departed England for active service on the Continent was a component of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division.

As with the large majority of the units of the 2nd Canadian Division, the 20th Battalion – except for its Transport Section which travelled via Southampton - crossed the Dover Straits through nearby Folkestone: On September 14, it...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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1915)



(continued)

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

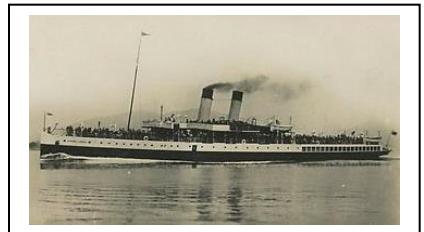
*The journey-time was even shorter than it may seem from reading above, as there is a one-hour time difference between the United Kingdom and France.

(Right: 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 20th 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 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 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 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.

Private March's 20th Battalion was to remain in the *Kingdom of Belgium* for the next eleven months. The sectors for which the 2nd 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 the Division's 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 to be 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 1st Canadian Division. During this period, the autumn of 1915 and the winter of 1915-1916, things were to be as quiet as things ever became 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 around Ypres (today Ieper) and the south-western reaches of the country as far as the coast remained under Belgian – and Allied – control.

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

**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.*

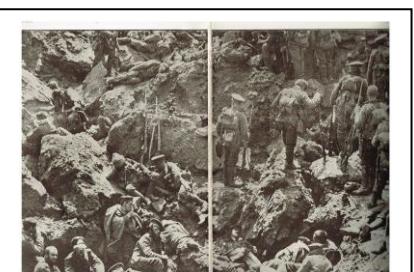


Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as possibly suggested in the preceding format and the troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(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)

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

It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27th day of March, the British 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 was then 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, 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 20th Battalion War Diary reports and those of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, that its – the 20th 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 activity and few casualties appear to have been reported.

On April 4 the entire 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade was relieved from the front-line positions and withdrawn to the area of Dickebusch just south-west of Ypres – only to return with the 4th Brigade on April 8 for an attack, for which the 20th Battalion had been designated as the reserve force. On April 13 the 20th Battalion was withdrawn further still, to Camp K in the vicinity of Reninghelst.

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

**The Canadian 3rd 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 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, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians 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, 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 20th Battalion was not to play a leading part in the action at *Mount Sorrel*, there having been only one occasion on which a single 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.

While the unit's War Diarist was well aware of events...*to the left*...and while he also reported 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 lasted eleven days before culminating 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 finished up in much the same positions they had held prior to June 2, the only difference being that the cemeteries were now that much fuller.

Private March was absent on the day of the German offensive, June 2. On that same date he was sent on a...*pigeon course*. Electronic communications were still in the early stages of development (see also further below) and the armed forces of both sides were still reliant on semaphore and Morse, and even more so, on the *runner*; and for the despatch of messages further afield there was the carrier pigeon.

What there was to know about carrier pigeons and how they operated is not documented among Private March's papers but apparently he learned all that he was able to glean on the subject in the space of three days, since he was reported as having returned *to duty* with his unit on June 5.

After the exertions of *Mount Sorrel*, any infantry activity was now to be on a local level, limited to regular patrols and sporadic raids, and most casualties were to be due to artillery action 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 that 1916 the fury of the affair at *Mount Sorrel* had progressively abated and the summer was to be quiet – on many occasions the 20th Battalion War Diary entry of the day was to commence with a synopsis of the weather. Patrols there were and some units mounted the occasional raid; a perusal of the unit's War Diary entries of that period, however, show only a single such action was undertaken by the 20th Battalion: on June 28, an unsuccessful attempt to bomb enemy positions was to result in two *killed in action*, three wounded, one *missing in action* - but in little else.

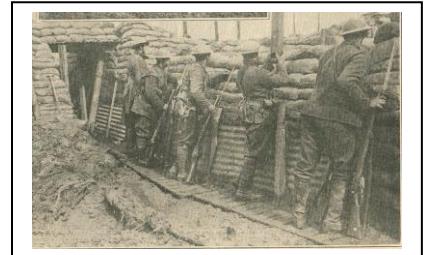
Private March and his comrades-in-arms were also kept busy in ways other than avoiding the enemy's artillery-fire and his marksmen's bullets: repairing gun-fire damage and one's own wire - while cutting and destroying the enemy's; carrying myriad supplies and ammunition; constructing positions and communications; 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, but each British soldier, and thus likely all the Canadians – except those of the 22nd Battalion perhaps – were provided with a small handbook on the subject.*

Private March himself was kept occupied for several days during the month of August when he was temporarily attached for an unspecified reason to the 1st Canadian Training Company. This secondment lasted for nine days and he *apparently* reported back to his Battalion on August 24 (see immediately below).

(Excerpt from the 20th 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, August 25, suggests that by then the Battalion personnel was surely becoming aware – in some small manner - of what was lying in store for the unit and indeed 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 – then faced the personnel of the 20th Battalion before it arrived at the location of the 2nd Army Training Centre at and in the vicinity of the village of La Panne. On August 29 those new British 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 20th 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 train pulled into the railway station at Auxi-le-Château. Bilked each night in communities along the route, Private March's 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 within range of the German artillery.

The 20th Battalion was now about to enter the cauldron of *the Somme*.

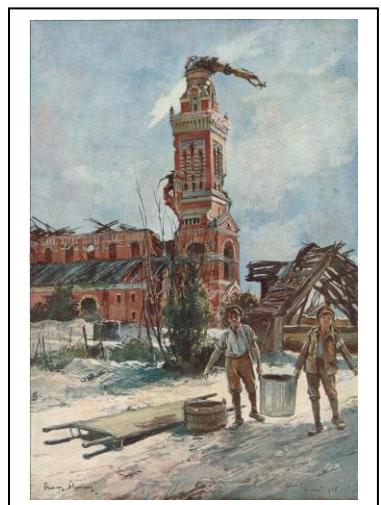
(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near to the village of Courcelette* – photograph from 2015)

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



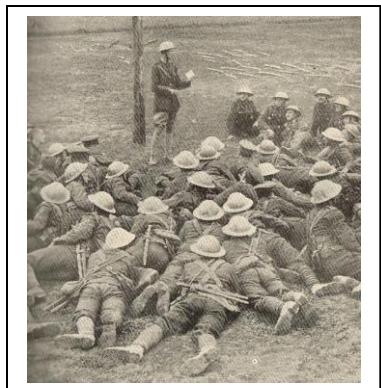
By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of just four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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 was to be 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 Courcelette.



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

(continued)

On the way from *Brickfields* to his Battalion's new billets on September 10, the Officer Commanding the 20th Battalion and his Adjutant 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 the novelty 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 permitted it, training 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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for September 14, 1916)

**The following is a list of equipment issued to the 19th Battalion, also of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade, on September 10 when the Brigade was ordered into the line to relieve the 1st Infantry Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division. Each man carried with him apart from his personal equipment... 2 MILLS bombs, 2 sandbags, and two extra bandoliers of ammunition. Also... 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 4th Canadian Brigade Operational Order Number 70)

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

(Excerpt from the same 19th 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 4th Canadian Infantry Bde. – partially comprising both the 19th and 20th Battalions - took part in the attack in conjunction with the 6th Canadian Infantry Bde. on our left, and the 15th Division (British) on our right.*

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



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

In contrast to the efforts of - and despite the sacrifices of - the 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 2nd Canadian Division whose objectives had been the village of Courcelette and the adjacent sugar factory.

The 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade captured the sugar factory that morning and Courcelette was to fall to the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade later that evening.

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

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



The Battalion's success, however, was to come at a price: the estimated casualties incurred by the 20th Battalion during this two-day operation, and according to the unit's War Diarist, 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* – an operation 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 2nd Canadian Division for this next occasion were to be some of the newly-arrived Canadian troops of the 3rd 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 were immediately needed in the proximity of Albert to accommodate the incoming troops; thus those not to be fighting were to be ordered to march into the rear area – still close enough, however, to be recalled in a few days' time.

The 20th Battalion was one of those ordered to march. On September 18, only the day after its retirement from the field, Private March's unit commenced its march away from Albert: Harponville; Val de Maison – for two days and where re-enforcements were to report 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 finished the day in bivouacs at *Tara Valley Camp*, this military locale, like *Brickfields*, in the vicinity of the town of Albert.

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

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

The 20th 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 Courcelette on the night of September 28-29 it was to work at consolidating the newly-won area. And, while there, on October 1, the unit was ordered to attack a part of the German defensive system known as *Regina Trench*.

(Right: *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-generators, played havoc with the attacking troops. The attack, even though some ground was eventually to be 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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for October 1, 1916)

(Right above: *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 20th Battalion was thus obliged to create new defensive positions. This work continued for the following day and night, hindered by heavy rain. Mercifully the enemy appeared not to appreciate the precariousness of the Canadian situation and the intensity of his artillery activity tapered off as the hours had passed.



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

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.

On the morrow, at mid-day, Private March and his 20th Battalion marched through Albert and further, to billets at Bouzincourt where it arrived four hours later. This was to be the first stage of the unit's withdrawal from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

It then 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 all the Battalion's losses.



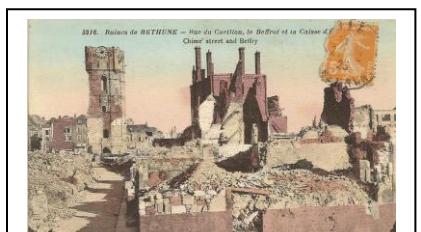
(Right above: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras which had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)

On October 14 the unit 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 organized and cleaned their equipment and also themselves, baths and clean clothing being 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 a relative calm, thus allowing the 20th 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)

(continued)

During this autumnal period, on November 15, while his Battalion was serving in the line in the *Maroc Sector*, Private March was elsewhere. He had been detailed for an unspecified time as part of a...sanitary fatigue. Also unspecified once again were any details of the assignment, although one might give pause as to whether he might not have preferred to remain in service with his unit in the line.

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

By the end of January Private March had been back and forth to England. He had been granted, as of January 15, a ten-day period of leave – plus travel-time – which saw him re-join the Battalion on January 28. What he did in England is not documented in his files.

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



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

Thus the winter-time passed for the 20th Battalion, much of it in training and instruction. It was not to be until the middle of February that this routine began to change when the unit was ordered to move southwards into the *Thelus Sector* some few kilometres to the north of the city of Arras.



The transfer was effected 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 many weeks of calm, soon taking notice of the violence of the ongoing artillery duels.

This first tour was 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 was thereupon in its turn sent forward again to relieve the 18th Canadian Infantry Battalion back in the *Thelus Sector*.

(Right: *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*)



(continued)

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 March'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.

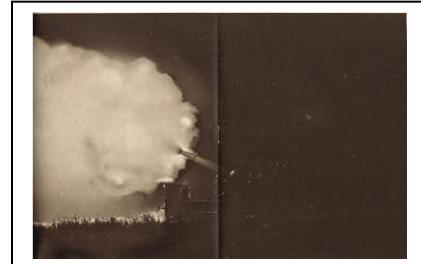
There followed a further period in support positions in the *Thelus Sector* before special training sessions took hold once more. It was, of course, to be not only the 20th Battalion involved but the entire Canadian Corps, the infantry units being withdrawn in sequence to the rear areas, there to partake 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 March and the other personnel of the 20th Battalion, this all began to take place on March 22 at Bois des Alleux. There would be 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 March and his comrades-in-arms had previously spent in the trenches there had not been just totally fortuitous. It was from the *Thelus Sector* that the 2nd Canadian Division, thus the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade and the 20th Battalion, were to pass to the attack a few days hence.

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.*

(Right above: 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's 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.

(continued)

On April 9 of that year 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.

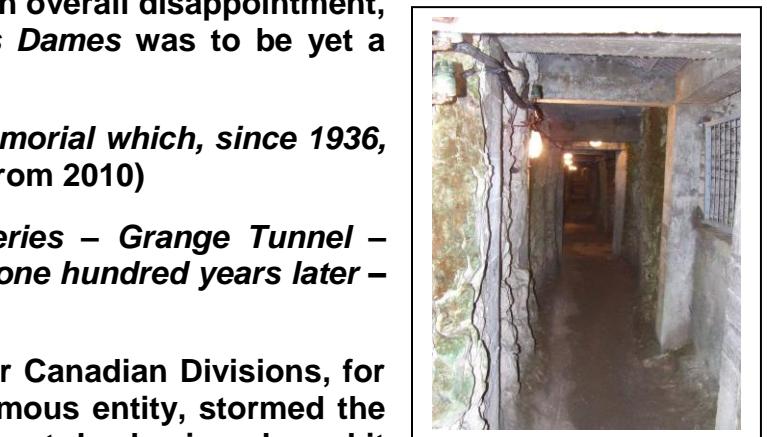
(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

(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 4th or 3rd 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 3rd and 4th 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 Roicourt was to be the 1st Canadian Division, while sandwiched between it and the two Divisions on Vimy Ridge was Private March's 2nd Canadian Division, plus a British Brigade, in the area of the village of Thélus.

There follows an excerpt from the 20th Battalion (*Central Ontario*) War Diary entry for April 9, Easter Monday of 1917:

(continued)

Our barrage opened at 5.30 am, and at the same times the Battalions forming the attack advanced. 20th Battalion supplied two companies as Moppers up to the 1st wave, No. 1 Coy being on the right in the rear of the 18th Battalion, and No. 2 Coy on the left in the rear of the 19th 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 20th 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 20th 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 British and Canadian High Command, perhaps having expected a stronger enemy reaction, had already decided, once the objectives had been taken, to consolidate the newly-won positions rather than to order the continuation of 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 March 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 4th Canadian Division, the German were still occupying two high points, ‘the Pimple’ and Hill 145 – the latter on which the Canadian National Memorial would later be built - but these too were soon to fall.

(continued)

The 20th 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 4th Canadian Division Front, none was to be reported by Private March's Battalion which ended its day by relieving a British unit in the line.



This work of a defensive nature was to continue for the 20th Battalion until April 14 when the entire 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade was ordered relieved and was withdrawn into reserve in the area of Bois des Alleux, the 20th 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 20th Battalion moved into the forward area on April 21-22.

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

During that week – April 21-26 - the 20th 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*).

(Right: *There are two military cemeteries, French and British, side by side at La Targette. In the foreground lie six-hundred thirty-eight British and Commonwealth dead, while in the French cemetery, the mass of crosses in the background, are almost eleven-thousand five-hundred. A kilometre or so distant is a German burial ground within the bounds of which are interred a further forty-five thousand. – photograph from 2014*)



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 wash 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. 4th Brigade who complimented the men on their cleanliness and steadiness.* (Excerpt from 20th 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 March fared is not recorded. Drills, clothing and church parades, and a march-past for the aforementioned General-Officer-Commanding the 4th 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 had established itself in the support area by seven o'clock that evening and at least one company was at 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 1st Canadian Division and the 6th Brigade of the 2nd Canadian Division were in action and the 1st Canadian 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 2nd Division Front to report on that day although Private March's Battalion on 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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for May 3, 1917)

*Often referred to in Canadian sources as just Fresnoy – the problem being that it is not the only community of that name in the area: a second Fresnoy is located 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 further to the north. Canadian troops fought at this second Givenchy in 1915. There is a third Givenchy not far distant.

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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for May 4, 1917)

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

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

(continued)

On May 6 Private March'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 March was apparently not the target and all remained quiet in front of the 20th Battalion.

The community of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle, to the right of the 20th 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 20th Battalion as German troops were reported as having infiltrated through the defences to the unit's right.



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



(Right above: *The author has as yet no pictures of Fresnoy-en-Gohelle. This is the nearby village of Vimy – occupied by the Germans since early in the War until only days after the attack on Vimy Ridge – as it was in 1919, just after the conflict.* – from a vintage post-card)

(Right above: *Vimy Ridge – the ground attacked by the 4th 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)

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 March's Battalion's experience on the night of May 8-9, 1917, deserves a perusal as it illustrates the results of these difficulties. (Excerpts from the 20th 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...

(continued)

At 4.30 pm orders cancelling Counter attack received.

At 9.00 pm orders received to make Counter attack at 2 am on 9th... (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 20th Bn. to get into position for jumping off, and a duplicate sent by other runners five minutes later. At 1.40 am 1st runner to "D" Coy 21st Bn., returned saying he could not find the Coy. At 1.55 am runners sent to "D" Coy, 21st Bn., and "A" and "C" Coys returned saying that they could not find the Coys.

At 1.58 am, Major Raymond, "C" Coy, 21st 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 (what he had suggested).

Further messages were sent out to two Coys of 20th Bn and 19th 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 report that they could not find "A" & "C" Coys, 20th Bn, and at 3.45 am that they could not find "D" Coy, 21st Bn - ...

At 3.55 am one Coy 19th 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, 21st Battalion, to move forward...and "A" Coy, 20th 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.

20th 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 20th Battalion joining two companies of the 19th 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 20th Battalion moved into the trenches in close support in order to relieve those of the 19th Battalion which had spent the night there. The Battalion's four Companies were now again posted together as a unit.

(continued)

From thereon, the 20th 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 20th Battalion War Diary entry for May 10, 1917)

**This was quite likely to have been 'D' Company; two sources report Private March as serving with it at the time.*

This second confrontation within days at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle was one of the last actions involving Canadian forces in this, the *First Battle of Arras*, which officially drew to a close on May 15, 1917.

The British High Command had by that 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 other operations to take place as well in the sectors of the front running north-south down from Béthune to Lens.



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

(Right above: *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*)

One of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

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

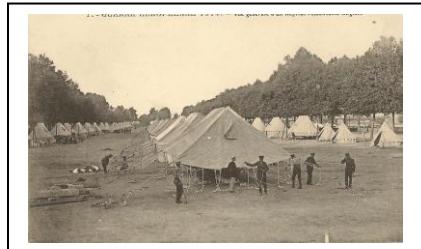


* * * * *

However, Private March appears to have been spared service not only in the attack on *Hill 70* (see further below) but also in the raid that preceded it on August 9. On August 5 he was attached to the staff of the 2nd Canadian Training Battalion. His papers do not record for how long Private March was to serve with the Training Battalion, whether he remained there until September 27 or whether he returned to his 20th Battalion at some time during the interim. But on that last date it is recorded that he was employed by the CCRC*.

**The Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp had been formed to organize incoming troops from the time they left the Base Depot at Étaples until their despatch to their new unit. When inaugurated in September of 1917, it had been established at Villers-au-Bois, before being relocated to the north-west soon afterwards at Calonne-Ricouart, some sixty kilometres inland from Étaples.*

A single day spent at the 58th Casualty Clearing Station at Lillers on October 22, there to undergo dental work, is all that is documented in Private March's file until that December of 1917. Once again, it is uncertain whether he was to serve with his Battalion in the field during this period or otherwise. On that December 15 he was recorded as once more being employed by the CCRC.



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

On the day before Christmas Eve of 1917, Private March was again granted leave, on this occasion for fourteen days. But where he was to spend this time is not to be found in his dossier and all that is known of him is that he returned to duty to the CCRC on time, on January 4 of the New Year, 1918.

Finally, on March 19, he was *struck off strength* by the Reinforcement Camp and *taken on strength* by his former unit, the 20th Battalion, on a miserable day: *Raining all day. No training parades possible. Training was carried out in the huts and the day used as shown on special syllabus...* (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for March 19, 1918)

The huts – and therefore the 20th Battalion – were both in the vicinity of the community of Petit Servins.

* * * * *

During Private March's (at times *presumed*) absence, his Battalion had been employed fighting in a major single battle in August, and in a battle-campaign at the end of October and into November, 1917. The first of these had been the Canadian attack at *Hill 70*.

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. Yet *Hill 70* was high enough to be considered – by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.



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

Objectives had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of the day of the attack, 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 had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, by then employing newly-developed procedures, had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

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



Only days before the attack at *Hill 70* the 20th Battalion had raided enemy lines. Not entirely a success, the unit had incurred eleven *killed*, thirty *wounded* and eight *missing*.

The operation at *Hill 70* had proved more costly. For the period of August 14 to 20 the 20th Battalion had suffered the following losses: twenty-nine *killed or died of wounds*, one hundred thirty-nine *wounded* and four *missing*.

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

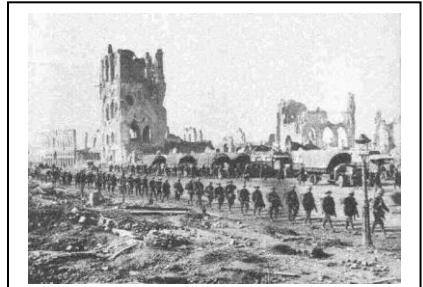
(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)



The Canadians at this time had been preparing for a campaign that would be carried over for the remainder of the summer and perhaps into the autumn. However, further north in Belgium, the British-led offensive of that summer was proceeding less well than had optimistically been predicted. Losses had been heavy and the British were running short of reserves.

Once again, the soldiers from the Dominions were to be ordered to provide the manpower necessary for the continuation of the offensive. The first were to be the Anzacs – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps – and then, as of mid-October, the Canadians. Thus, after the confrontation at *Hill 70*, the Canadians had returned to playing a defensive role and had remained in their northern French sectors to train for things to come at Ypres and in *the Salient*.

The Lens-Béthune campaign thus having been drawn to a close, it was then to be only some six weeks until the first Canadian units had been ordered to join the battle ongoing – since the last day in July - in Belgium, to the north-east of Ypres. Officially designated the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign was to become better known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that - ostensibly - was one of the British Army's objectives.



(Preceding page: *Troops file in front of the Cloth Hall and 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 had entered the fray - after the Anzacs - it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which had spear-headed the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.

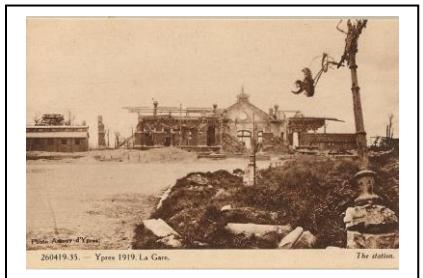
From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse had been true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division finally having entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the dreadful autumn of 1917* – from Illustration)



The 20th Battalion had not begun its move towards Belgium until October 5 when the unit had marched some twenty-four kilometres northwards from its camp at Villers-au-Bois to the community of Ourton, there to remain for a week before then having continued its trek as far as Cæstre. There training had ensued as it had at Ourton; at Cæstre it was to last for a further six days.

For the 20th Battalion the final move into Belgium had begun at Cæstre at four-fifteen in the morning of October 29 when the unit had paraded to the railway station. Having entrained, the Battalion was to be transported to Ypres whereupon it had marched across the ruins of the city to report to the tented camp at Potijze, to the north-east of the city.



By this time in the Great War the aeroplane had come into its own as an offensive weapon and as a result the camp was being regularly bombed both by day and by night. By the third day of it, the Battalion War Diarist appears to have been becoming nonchalant about the whole thing: *Usual bombing at night...he wrote.*

(Right above: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained* – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card)

(Right: *Canadian troops, performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole, at some time during the last month of Passchendaele* – from Le Miroir)



It was on November 2 that the 20th Battalion had been ordered to move forward... *It was a long march to our destination most of it being along a duck walk, which was very difficult to walk on. This is a wretched spot, no accommodation at all, very wet, and shelling heavy nearly all the time...* (Excerpt from 20th Battalion War Diary entry for November 2, 1917)

(continued)

The morrow had been spent by the Battalion in the quest for...*dry spots to build shelters*. Their efforts were to be more or less successful, some of the men having instead occupied abandoned pill-boxes or sharing others already in use.

The following day again was to be passed in sheltering from the heavy shelling...and then, early on the next day again, November 5, the 20th Battalion had been relieved.

There really had not been much to it. From back at Potijze the unit had then marched through Ypres to the railway station from where a train transported it to Brandhoek, half-way between Ypres and Poperinghe, where *Toronto Camp* had been established. Yet, since their first tour had begun on November 2, a total of fifty-three casualties had already been counted of which two killed and ten wounded during the relief of only hours before.



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

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



On November 8 the Battalion had been on the move forward again to eventually relieve a unit in the forward area... *The relief was not made as soon as it might have been owing to the extreme darkness, heavy shelling, and thick mud*. The changeover had been reported as completed at ten minutes to five on the next morning, November 9.

On that day the Battalion had assembled in the area of the Front. It was about to be a part of the attack by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions up the slope from Zonnebeke towards – and past – the ruins of Passchendaele itself, an assault which was to go in on the following day.



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge in the outskirts of the re-constructed village – photograph from 2015*)

In preparation for this and the British and Canadian guns had been ranging in on their pre-selected targets and loosing off barrages. The Germans had understandably retaliated, the result having been an almost day-long artillery duel.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Looking down the slope, the countryside in-between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele (Passendale) up which the Canadians advanced in November of 1917 - photograph from 2011*)

Some of the action of November 10 had been in close proximity to what was left of the village of Passchendaele, the attack having eventually passed by it to the left. The 20th Battalion's objectives for the day had been reached on time and the attackers had then begun to consolidate the gains in anticipation of enemy counter-attacks and heavy artillery bombardments.

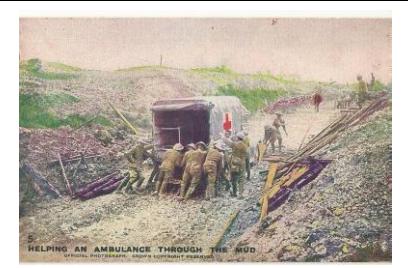
During November 11 the Battalion had then busied itself carrying forward water and rations, and with the evacuation of the wounded towards the rear, before having been relieved throughout that night and during the next morning.

(Right below: *Transferring sick and wounded from a field ambulance to the rear through the mud by motorized ambulance and man-power – from a vintage post-card*)

The unit had retired to Potijze on November 12, to Brandhoek on the 13th, and from nearby Vlamertingue two days later, it had traversed the frontier on a fleet of twenty-four busses into France on its way to billets in Haverskerque. Two days later again it was ordered further to the south, to the vicinity of Camblain l'Abbé; even at this time of the year, mid-November, what was left of the village's greenery must have seemed particularly special to the wearied troops after the mud and chaos of the Belgian battlefield.

The 20th Battalion's time at *Passchendaele* had been served.

(Right: *A century after the passing-through of the Canadian Corps, the venerable French village of Camblain l'Abbé is today a great deal more tranquil than back then. – photograph from 2017*)



(Right: *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 honoured 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 near today's Passendale. – photograph from 2010*)



Once it had spent several days in proximity to Camblain l'Abbé, the 20th Battalion had been ordered to the forward area on November 21, into the Acheville Sector to the south-east of Lens. It was not to be a very active tour, punctuated – according to the unit's War Diarist – by patrolling by both sides and by the ever-increasing incursions of malevolent enemy aircraft.

After nine days, on the last day of the month, the Battalion had been withdrawn by motor transport back to *Cellars Camp* at Neuville St-Vaast where it had been ordered to take a bath before being re-clothed and re-equipped.

The two weeks plus two days that had then been spent at *Cellars Camp* were not a restful period. There was apparently so much construction and excavation to be done that the pre-arranged training at times had to be cancelled – the large majority of Battalion personnel having been out engaged with working-parties.

A short train ride on December 15 was to bring the Battalion back to the *Acheville Sector* where its personnel would again be employed as working-parties, carrying-parties and wiring-parties. However, of course, now all of this had the added attraction of being undertaken while being shelled, mortared, bombed and shot at*.

But at least the Battalion's Christmas celebrations were to be less fraught with danger, as on December 21 the Battalion had retired far behind the front into the village of Bailleul-lès-Pernes. Safe it may have been, but the War Diarist had found the billets...*not very good and somewhat scattered*. Good billets or not, the Battalion was to remain there for over three weeks, until January of the New Year, 1918.

*One event that occurred during the month of December to which the 20th Battalion War Diarist appears to have failed to make allusion was the Canadian National Election. As of December 1, 1917, the personnel of the Canadian Armed Forces began to visit the polling stations organized for that purpose. The War Diaries of some of the units recorded voting in excess of ninety percent.

From that point on, the Battalion had returned to the routines of existence in the trenches. While in the forward area it had been posted to locales such as Avion, Méricourt, Liévin and Lens; withdrawn from the front it was to be stationed in such places as Villers-au-Bois, Neuville St-Vaast, Souchez and Petit Servins, this last of course being where Private March was to re-join his unit on March 19.



(Right above: *The village of Souchez as it was during the summer of 1915, before the British took over responsibility for the sector from the French. – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

Then, only forty-eight hours later, it was the first day of spring: March 21, 1918.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came 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 that March 21. It was to be the first of four.



(continued)

The main blow was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops posted there.

(Preceding page: *While the Germans did not attack Lens 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 to oblige them to retain troops in the area.* – from *Le Miroir*)

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

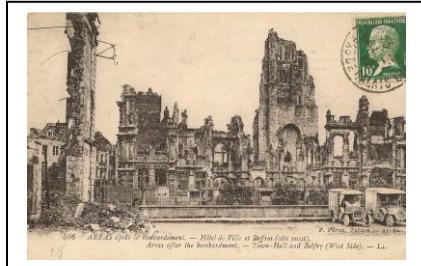
*A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, was launched in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.

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



In the three days that followed the German attack the Battalion was scheduled on various occasions to relieve a British unit and to be prepared to move at twelve hours’ notice – then reduced to two hours’ notice. These orders were subsequently cancelled and Private March’s unit remained *in situ* at Petit Servins.

The first move that appears to have been a veritable response to the German offensive came about on the morning of March 24 when the 20th Battalion boarded busses and was transported to the small Cubitt Camp in the area of Neuville St-Vaast. This was part of a move by the entire 2nd Canadian Division towards the west of the city of Arras in order to forestall any encroachments there by the German.



(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)

Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive and the activities of the German forces there were as much intended as anything else to keep the British off balance and uncertain while the German main advance proceeded towards Amiens and its important railway facilities*. However, the British and Canadian High Commands were not to be aware of the enemy intentions, thus the move to the area by the Canadians in anticipation thereof.

*At the same time hopefully splitting the French and British armies, driving the former south towards Paris, the latter northwards towards the Channel ports.

(continued)

From Neuville-St-Vaast by the end of the month, Private March and his unit had moved into the area south of Arras which they would occupy – and which would occupy them – for the next number of weeks: from Wailly in the west eastwards through Mercatel as far as Neuville-Vitasse. In fact it was not to be until towards the end of June that the 20th Battalion would be transferred to another sector.



(Right above: *The original much smaller Wailly Orchard Cemetery started in 1916 was greatly enlarged by the Canadians during the spring of 1918. Three-hundred sixty-six dead lie therein.* – photograph from 1915)

By that time a relative calm had descended on the front as the German threat had faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but he had gained nothing of any military significance on either of the two fronts. 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.

The Allies from this point of view were a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene.

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

The 20th Battalion and Private March, as previously seen, had remained in the *Mercatel Sector* until the end of the month of June. On the 27th trains arrived at Wailly to transfer them further to the west, to Hauteville where the unit was advised that this move was to be of a permanent nature. As Hauteville was in the rear area – and was soon to boast of facilities such as a cinema – it is unlikely that any great number of complaints was to be heard.



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

(Right: *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)



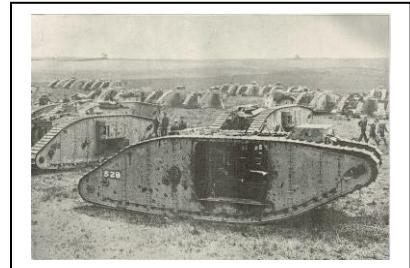
Alas for the 20th Battalion, the permanent nature of the posting to Hauteville proved to be somewhat temporary and, as of the middle of the month of July, Private March was to find himself moving on five different occasions. No infantry action came about during this period, however, and the period from July 24 to 29 was passed peacefully enough in the vicinity of Izel-Lès-Hameau.

The next few weeks were to tell a different story.

(20th Battalion War Diary for July 30, 1918) At 1 a.m. the Battalion moved off to PETIT HOUVIN, the entraining point. This was a march of seventeen kilometres. At 11 a.m. the Battalion was entrained and at 3 p.m. we arrived at HANGEST SUR SOMME. After a short interval the move was resumed by route march to BOUGAINVILLE, 12 miles distant, which was reached at 11 p.m. The Q.M. had gone ahead and arranged billets.

Bougainville is a community some twenty kilometres just to the south-west of the medieval city of Amiens and, after its exertions of the previous day in reaching there, the Battalion was to spend the final day of July in...resting and cleaning-up. It was to be the last such opportunity for a while.

Reveille on August 1 was at half-past four in the morning. (Excerpt from 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 1, 1918) The Battalion moved off at 6 a.m. and proceeded to the 9th Tank Battalion training grounds...for a demonstration and training with tanks... Whether the once-sceptical officer was still responsible for the Battalion journal is unclear, but if he was, he made no further mention of his feelings about tanks on this occasion.



(Right above: In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France' – from Illustration)

After two further days of training on August 2 and 3, at ten-thirty in the evening of the 3rd, the Battalion set off on the twenty-five kilometre march to St-Acheul*, a south-eastern suburb of Amiens.

*Not to be confused with St-Acheul north-east of Abbéville and also in the Département de la Somme.

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



The 20th Battalion was not alone in occupying the railways and roads of the Somme at this time: a large number of other Canadian units – indeed, the entire Canadian Corps – had by this time begun to move in a semi-circular itinerary from the area of Arras around the western side of Amiens, then southwards before turning east again to finish in front of the city on its south-eastern side. Thus the Corps was to finish its transfer in front of the positions which the enemy had occupied by the end of their spring offensive some four months earlier. This huge movement was to be effected in only a matter of days, at first mostly by train and motor transport, but all of the latter stages of it on foot, and these also during the hours of darkness.

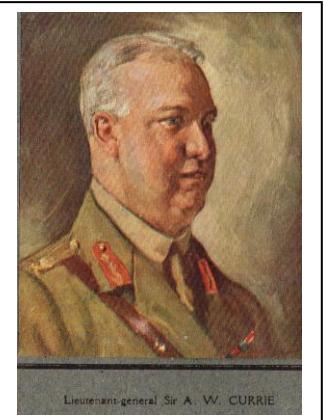
It was intended to surprise the enemy – and it would.

(continued)

Thus, at half-past nine on the evening of August 4, Private March and the 20th Battalion were once again on the road. This night's march was to be from St-Acheul, where the day had been spent in the sheds and the courtyard of the local hospital out of sight of any German aerial observers, to the nearby – perhaps three kilometres distant – community of Boutillerie.

The same pattern was followed on the following day. Having spent the day sheltering – perhaps as much from the rain as from German eyes - in some unoccupied trenches, the 20th Battalion was on the move once more on that evening by nine-thirty. Once again the distance was not great, as Private March's unit reached its destination, Cachy, in just over two hours where the troops were soon located in trenches and cellars.

On the morrow a small correction was made in the evening to the troops' dispositions, although these were apparently all in the same general area. It was therefore from Cachy during the evening of August 7 that the 20th Battalion was to make its ultimate moves towards the forward area.



(Right above: *Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur William Currie, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps – from Illustration*)

(Excerpt from 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 7, 1918) At 9.30 p.m. a limber came up from the rear to take back all surplus kit, etc. The Battalion fell in at 10.30 p.m. and moved off to the assembly positions which were reached in good time. Battalion Headquarters were established...

In July of 1918 the French, supported by newly-arrived American troops, had launched a counter-attack in response to one of the last German offensives of the Great War. Some historians appear to regard this operation as the first of the several Allied campaigns which were from this time onwards to simultaneously continue, to end only at eleven o'clock in the morning of November 11 later that year.

Now, on August 8, was launched the *Third Battle of Amiens*, undertaken by French, British, Commonwealth, and some American forces. The Canadians, although to be withdrawn as early as after only ten days of fighting – to be replaced by French units - were to play a vital role in the attack and in the subsequent successful advance.

It was at 4.30 in the morning on that August 8 that the advance in front of Amiens began – *the Hundred Days* as the Allied thrusts came later collectively to be known. The Canadians were to move forward some twenty kilometres in the first three days of the offensive, a feat unheard of since the autumn of 1914 when the opposing forces had settled into four years of trench stalemate*.

*The only exceptions to this rule having been the opening day of the First Battle of Cambrai, November 20, 1917, and the German advances in that spring of 1918

(continued)

From the German point of view, it was bad enough for Ludendorff to call August 8 the... “Schwarzer Tag des deutschen Heeres” – *the black day of the German Army.*

(Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry of August 8, 1918) *At 4.20 a.m. the barrage opened as arranged, and the Battalion jumped off closely behind the 21st Battalion who were in Support. A heavy fog prevailed which, added to the smoke of the barrage, made it impossible to see more than two or three yards in front of one. This made it very difficult for the tanks, who lost direction and were not able to give the support that had been expected. During the attack we found a number of men hiding in the grain and in dugouts, and owing to the density of the fog, a number of the enemy were passed by and were not discovered until they commenced firing at us from behind.*

The first objective was reached without many casualties and the second objective, namely MARCELCAVE was reached without much further opposition. A large number of the enemy both dead and alive were found in this place. ... “A” Company had a lively bombing encounter in which the enemy were overcome... A large number of Field Guns and Machine Guns were captured by the Battalion.



(Right above: A German field gun put out of action and captured during the Canadian advance – from *Le Miroir*)

Estimated casualties – 20 Other Ranks “Killed”, and 3 Officers and 30 Other Ranks “Wounded”.

...The remainder of the day was quiet, the advance being continued by the 5th and 6th Canadian Infantry Brigades. There was a little shelling at night but we had no further casualties...



(Right: Canadian troops consolidating their positions while others in the background cross a river on a make-shift bridge – from *Le Miroir*)

The advance inevitably began to slow down after the gains of the first forty-eight hours, this due to a stiffening German resistance – even counter-attacks; the fact that the support troops with their supplies, and the artillery, were having a hard time keeping apace with the forward troops; and the tanks, although a great success, were becoming greatly reduced in number. Nevertheless, the success of the offensive was evidenced by the entries in the 20th Battalion War Diary subsequent to August 8.



(Right above: Canadian and German wounded, some cases obviously more serious than others, await evacuation to the rear area – from *Le Miroir*)

(continued)

The journal for those days shows that, although being relieved - and relieving in turn – and apart from some apparently ineffectual and sporadic German shelling and air raids, the 20th Battalion had continued to advance as the attack progressed, yet it was not to be called into action again until August 16, eight days after the opening barrage. It is true that by this time several orders had been received to *prepare for an attack*, but these had then had been recanted.

On that August 16, just after mid-night...*information was received that the 19th Canadian Battalion were putting on a show (an attack) at 2 p.m. and that we had to support them... It was decided to postpone the show until four o'clock, in order to make all the necessary arrangements.*

In the meantime, routes to the forward positions were reconnoitred... At 4.25 p.m. the barrage opened and our troops went forward to the attack, reaching their objective with very few casualties. Contrary to expectations the relief by the 4th Canadian Division was carried out. (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry of August 8, 1918)

This relief, undertaken and completed on the night of August 16-17, saw the 20th Battalion retire from the field, at first to the area of Caix and then, later on that same day, further back to Guillancourt, a two-and-a-half hour march away. For the 20th Battalion, as of this date, the *Third Battle of Amiens* was now a part of its history: Private March's unit was very soon to be returning whence it had come less than three weeks previously, to the area of Arras.



(Right above: *French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix: Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground.* – photograph from 2017)

Once again it was not only the 20th Battalion but the entire Canadian Corps which was going to be on the move. Following in reverse many of the routes and itineraries of just weeks previously - and again the procedure to be undertaken in a matter of days - the four Canadian Divisions were to be back in the forward area east of before the end of August – there to play their part in a further offensive.



(Right: *British forces were not withdrawn as were the Canadians from in front of Amiens in August of 1918. In tandem with French troops they continued the offensive, as here in the attack against St-Quentin.* – from *Le Miroir*)

The Supreme Commander, Foch, was intent on keeping pressure on the Germans by attacking on several fronts. After the first two weeks of the assault to the east of Amiens, the battle there was now becoming mainly a British, Anzac and French responsibility; however, there was now straightaway to be a further offensive opened along the Arras-Cambrai road axis – with the Canadian Corps, in tandem with British troops, again to be used as a spear-head.

And once again, it appears that the Germans proved not to be prepared for the appearance of the Canadian Corps.

The 20th Battalion now travelled by a circuitous route, by train and on foot – a transfer which took four days, from August 20 to 24. On that August 24, at two o'clock in the morning, it claimed its billets in the area of *Wailly Woods*, in the sector south-west of Arras which the unit had come to know well only months before. But there was to be precious little time given to rest as...*the C.O. called a meeting of Officers remaining in Camp at 12 noon and discussed the operations likely to take place tomorrow morning. All preparations were made to move into the line. The Companies moved off independently between 7 and 8.30 p.m.* (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry of August 24, 1918)

In fact the *Battle of the Scarpe* – also considered to be the first stage of the 2nd *Battle of Arras* - did not begin on that following day of August 25, although the 20th Battalion had moved into its ordered positions by five thirty-five that morning. The next hours were therefore spent in further preparations such as the perusal of the latest aerial photographs and of maps – and of course in adapting to the continuous stream of latest changes in the instructions sent down to the unit from above. ...*The whole Battalion were on their way to the assembly positions by 12 midnight.* (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 25, 1918)

(Excerpts from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 26, 1918) *The barrage opened at 3 a.m. and the Battalion moved forward to the attack...with the three forward companies with two Platoons in the first wave...*

There was little enemy opposition for about the first two thousand yards and the first objective was reached on time with few casualties. ...our right flank was held up by two Machine Guns, which post was rushed by...a party who captured the guns and killed or captured a number of the crew. ...three field guns and about 30 prisoners were captured. On nearing our objective the Battalion was met with considerable opposition from Snipers and Machine guns along both sides of the CAMBRAI Road.



(Right above: Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon. – photograph from 2015)

It was daylight by this time and Lieut. Stewart sent two runners with a message to a tank about 200 yards in rear to come to our assistance, which it did and succeeded in disposing of the enemy... We were able...to continue the advance and the objective was reached at 7.30 a.m. Consolidation was at once put in hand. During this period the enemy shelling was heavy and accurate. A number of casualties were caused by our own barrage...

...During the remainder of the day we were much troubled particularly on the left by artillery fire and suffered a number of casualties...

(continued)

...In this operation we captured about 150 prisoners, 5 Wishbang Guns, 3 4.2 Guns, 4 live horses, 3 transport wagons and a large number of machine guns.

(Right below: A group of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background – from Le Miroir)

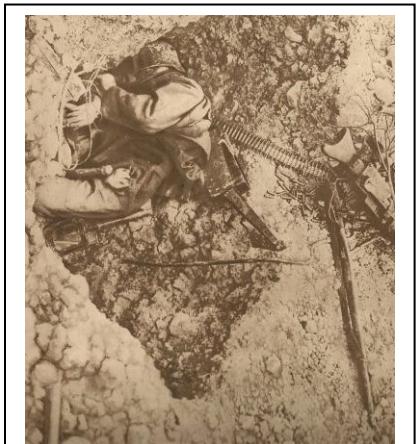
The Battalion's work, however, was not quite over: At 7.45 p.m. under a barrage, A. and C. Companies advanced about 1000 yards and established a line... This advance was made in sectional rushes. There was little opposition except from machine gun fire... No prisoners were taken but we captured two 5.9 field guns...



Private March had had a long and busy day, but the fighting had not been particularly difficult. On the following days, German resistance was to become better organized and more determined, enemy snipers and machine-gunners proving to be, as ever, formidable opponents, and his artillery ever-increasingly active; the Canadian and British advance was to continue, but more slowly, and although the advance of some eight kilometres in the space of three-four days was a massive feat of arms, by the time that the *Battle of the Scarpe* had run its course, some of the attackers' objectives were still in enemy hands.

The 20th Battalion jumped off at ten o'clock on the morning of August 27, the second day of the offensive, later than other troops, and in the face of heavy German gun-fire which caused a number of early casualties. The earlier Canadian attackers had also been caught in the enemy barrages and had been slowed down to the point where Private March's Battalion had soon caught up with them. At this point the opposing machine-gunners were very active from their defensive positions overlooking the field and the Canadian advance stalled for a while.

Even when once the push had been resumed it was soon held up again. ...By this time our barrage had died down completely and the opposition from both the machine gun fire and the artillery was heavy, gradually increasing. ...The enemy's fire continued to increase and no orders being received to continue the advance we withdrew at 5 p.m. to a position along the SUNKEN ROAD just to the west of VILLAGE TRENCH... (Excerpts from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 27, 1918)



Casualties had been reportedly heavy during the advance, difficulties had been encountered securing ammunition and, making things just that much more uncomfortable, some thirty to forty enemy planes had bombed and strafed the Central Ontario unit during that afternoon.

(Right above: A German machine-gunner who also gave his all – from Illustration)

(continued)

At eight o'clock on the following morning orders were received that the attack of the day before was to resume. On the front where the 20th Battalion was serving, the result was to be just as disappointing as it had been on August 27, the day before:

For a while the advance went according to plan... then the opposing artillery and machine gun fire increased considerably. At the same time heavy and uncut wire was encountered and the unit was compelled to shelter in shell holes. Apparently some small groups and even individuals made brave attempts to cross the wire, but all fell victims to the overwhelming machine guns.

As for receiving or send information ...it was impossible to get any accurate idea of the state of affairs existing, as communication by phone or visual was out of question and ninety per cent of all runners were casualties. (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for August 28, 1918)

The final operations of that August 28 comprised the establishment of an outpost line along the SUNKEN ROAD – the area near to which the unit had been obliged to shelter on the previous day – and also a line of positions so as to connect up with the troops of the 3rd Canadian Division.



(Right above: *Troops resting in the shallowest of trenches during a pause in the fighting on the Arras Front in the late summer or autumn of 1918 – from Le Miroir*)

...In this operation our casualties were very heavy. No prisoners or guns were captured. Whether this War Diary excerpt from the entry of August 28 refers to only the last-mentioned operation or to the whole day's fighting is not clear; it may well represent both.

Despite all their efforts, several objectives of the 20th Battalion's 2nd Canadian Division still remained contested as this offensive, the *Battle of the Scarpe*, drew to its conclusion. The German Army was still an efficient and courageous opponent, and the fighting during the three-four day offensive had cost the Canadian Corps and the 20th Battalion, heavily.

At two o'clock in the morning of August 29 Private March's 20th Battalion began to be relieved by components of the 8th Canadian Battalion, and its Companies began to fall back to an area between Wanquetin and Neuville-Vitasse. The War Diary entry of the day recorded that ...*The Battalion arrived at its destination with about 8 Officers and 120 O.R's.*



(Right: *Wancourt British Cemetery in which lie nineteen-hundred thirty-six soldiers of the Great War, eight-hundred twenty-nine of them unidentified – photograph from 1914*)

By August 31, two days later, the Battalion had retired into the vicinity of Wanquetin where the War Diarist reported that... *The tailor shop was opened and more than half the Battalion were completed with new patches.*

(continued)

He also had the time to record the following: *Our casualties for the recent operations were 14 Officers and 423 O.R's which added to the operations of 8th to 16th August, made a total for the month of 18 Officers and 563 Other Ranks.*

The first five days of the 2nd Battle of Arras had succeeded in overcoming the majority of the German defences to a depth of some eight kilometres – overrunning the battlefields of 1917 - and thus, despite the several set-backs, was to be considered a great success. It had laid the foundation for the next operation. After a two-day respite, on September 2, the advance was to be re-launched, now to reduce the enemy positions on the Drocourt-Quéant Line*, but on this occasion by troops of different Canadian and British divisions.

**In 1917 the Germans had retreated from certain sectors of the Western Front to occupy prepared defensive positions, the Siegfriedstellung, which came to be known the British and Commonwealth forces as the Hindenburg Line. The Drocourt-Quéant Line was a part of this system and the success of the Battle of the Scarpe had brought the Canadian and British attackers up in front of it.*

(Right: Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from *Le Miroir*)



As alluded to above, the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, having played their role during the *Battle of the Scarpe*, were not involved in the operations of the first days of September. These were to be in part the responsibility of the 1st and 4th Canadian Divisions, units of which had still been returning from the *Amiens Front* as late as August 28.

However, on September 2 at half-past four in the afternoon, the 20th Battalion began to move once more towards the forward area, by the end of the day being bivouacked in the area of Beaurains, in the southern outskirts of Arras, which was also where most of the following day was spent.

It would be a long march that began on the evening of that September 3, one which was to end in the area of Chery-Wancourt, perhaps some twelve kilometres distant – but only as the crow flies – and it was late when the unit's destination was reached. As it had been at Beaurains, there was no accommodation available for the Battalion personnel and it was to be bivouacs again.

Nor did the support area into which Private March's Battalion was to be posted on the next day, September 4, prove to be any more pleasant. It was located in an area of the Drocourt-Quéant Line where the fighting had only just recently concluded and...was found to be in a very dirty condition with a number of dead Germans and horses lying about. Work was commenced at once bury these*. (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for September 4, 1918)

**It was not only the Germans who lost heavily: the four-day battle was to cost the Canadian Corps some fifty-six hundred casualties.*

Private March's Battalion was to remain in this support area for the next twelve days, until September 16. On one or two occasions it seemed as though the order to advance would be issued, but even though fighting equipment was issued, it was subsequently withdrawn and the Battalion remained *in situ*. Its time was employed in the habitual ways: training, inspections, digging trenches, carrying-parties and salvage work – of both Allied and enemy materiel.



(Right above: *During their at times hasty retreat, the Germans abandoned a great amount of equipment which, at times, was turned against them. – from Le Miroir*)

On September 15, for a few hours, Private March was able to look forward to being relieved and withdrawn into the rear area. The order was then rescinded and modified so that his Battalion was now on the next day, September 16, to move *forward* into the *Front Line* to relieve the 19th Canadian Battalion. The switch was completed just before mid-night on that same September 16.

From that time until September 20, four days later, the War Diarist regularly uses the word *quiet* in his daily reports even though the unit was in the front-line trenches. And then the Battalion was in turn relieved - a bath likely then having been the high-light of the next day.

This holiday of sorts lasted all of two days, the Battalion then returning to its former front-line positions on the evening of September 22, a relief that was somewhat complicated by an enemy projector gas attack. However, this fortunately proved to be nothing much more than an inconvenience – by this time in the war, with the new masks, gas was becoming just another weapon.

On the night of September 25-26 the Battalion retired the dozen or so kilometres from its frontal positions near Buissy, to the vicinity of the community of Fontaine.

While on the move, Private March and his colleagues surely remarked upon the number of troops and the amount of equipment that must have been on its way to the west bank of the Canal du Nord by then for, on September 27, a day on which the 20th Battalion was engaged in training and attending pay parade – with a band concert in the evening - the Canadian Corps was to storm the Canal du Nord.



(Right above: *A part of the Canal was unfinished and dry and the Canadians crossed there as well as by bridges over that part which was filled with water. Here German prisoners evacuate wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the waterway – from Le Miroir*)

(Right above: *The same area of the Canal du Nord as it is almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it – photograph from 2015*)



While on September 28 the Battalion had moved forward to its former positions which, only days before had been a part of the front line, and despite various rumours at times that the unit was to cross the Canal du Nord and to move forward up to what was now the Front, it appears that it was only on October 1 that it did so. By the end of that day the unit had passed to the north of the village of Bourlon and was to encamp in a field in the vicinity of Raillencourt, just west of Cambrai on the main Arras to Cambrai Road*.



(Right above: *Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bourlon Wood. – photograph from 2016*)

**Three remarks on the 20th Battalion War Diary at this point, the first one perhaps of little importance: On October 1 the Diarist for the first time writes Cambrai instead of Cambria; the second is that for two days, September 30 and October 1, he records the Battalion as being...‘near Inchy’: the community of Inchy is sixteen or so kilometres to the east of Cambrai, and Cambrai at this time was still in German hands; the third is that on October 8 on two occasions he refers to the crossing of the Canal du Nord during the attack of the day on Cambrai: the canal crossed on that day was, in fact, the Canal de l’Escaut which flows north-south through the western suburbs of the town.*

Private March and his 20th Battalion were for now to remain in this area – Raillencourt and La Maison Neuve - until the night of October 8-9; thus after four days of sleeping in a field, on October 5...Steps were taken to obtain engineers, tools and material to make the shelters and general accommodation here more permanent. (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for October 4, 1918)



(Right above: *Raillencourt Communal Cemetery Extension, within the bounds of which lie just fewer than two-hundred dead of the Great War, the large majority of them Canadian – photograph from 2017*)

There had been by this time two warnings of an enemy counter-attack and heavy bombardments were to be experienced but nothing else had materialized and the artillery fire had gradually dissipated. Re-enforcements arrived during this period and the Battalion organized and readied itself for further action.

On October 8...Several different warning orders to move were received throughout the afternoon and night. The final order, received about midnight, ordered a move about 3.30 a.m. tomorrow to the MARCOING LINE. (Excerpt from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for October 8, 1918)

October 8 saw Private March’s Battalion cross the Canal de l’Escaut and move its way around the northern perimeter of Cambrai.

(continued)

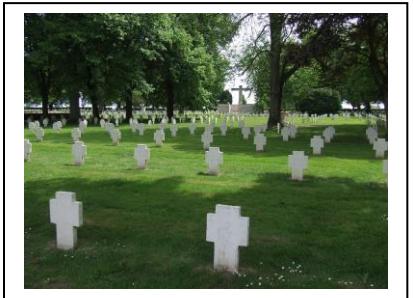
The fighting of the day was not intense as the Germans had determined by then to abandon the city rather than to stay and fight – thus the fires which burned there all day as they destroyed their supplies - and the Battalion advanced several kilometres to the north-east in the direction of the community of Naves... *Preparations were made for an attack in the morning.*



(Right above: *Canadian engineering troops create a passage for transport wagons near a demolished bridge ‘somewhere in France’ during the autumn of 1918 – from Le Miroir)*

(Excerpts from the 20th Battalion War Diary entry for October 10, 1918) At 6.a.m. on October 10th, the 20th Canadian Battalion attacked the enemy's positions in NAVES and the high ground N.E. of NAVES to ERCLIN RIVER....Little opposition was met, the enemy artillery fire being small, and M.G. fire almost nil. By 7 a.m. the Battalion had gained all its objectives and dug in. No prisoners were taken. Our casualties amounted to 2 Killed and 10 Wounded.

(Right: *Cambrai German Military Cemetery in which, during the time of their occupation, they also laid to rest French and Commonwealth dead – photograph from 2017)*



Casualty report: “Killed in Action” – Whilst with a party reporting to Battalion Headquarters in Naves, on the morning of October 10, 1918, and as they were crossing railroad trench they were met by a salvo of Enemy shells which exploded quite close. A number of men were wounded and Private March killed.

The son of Edgar March – to whom as of May 1, 1915, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - former fisherman, of Green’s Harbour, then of Manitou, Manitoba*, and of Martha March (née Rowe, deceased December 3, 1894), he was also brother to Wilson, Ernest-Hedley, Edgar-James, Charles-Theodore, Elsie-Bella, Blumus-Normore and to Lily-Beatrice.

*He moved to this latter address at some time after his wife’s death. The couple had been married on November 19, 1873, in the Anglican Church at New Harbour although all their children were baptized in the Methodist faith.

Private March was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 10, 1918, during the fighting of that day in the vicinity of Naves.

Jocelyn March had enlisted at the apparent age of thirty years and two months: date of birth (from attestation papers) at Green’s Harbour, Newfoundland, September 5, 1884. However, a copy of the Methodist Parish Records from Green’s Harbour cites the date as September 6, 1893.

(continued)

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



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