



**Private William Wesley Martin, Number GS/32935 of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (*City of London*) Regiment\*, British Expeditionary Force, is interred in Englebelmer Communal Cemetery Extension – Grave reference: C.5..**

**Little information seems to be available about the pre-military career of Private Martin. He apparently enlisted in Whitehall, City of Westminster, at some time during the period of 1916 to 1918.**

**(Right: *The image of the cap badge of the Royal Fusiliers Regiment is from the Forces War Records web-site.*)**



**(continued)**

***\*Some sources, including Ancestry, incorrectly record Private Martin as being a soldier of the London Regiment. During the course of the Great War there were to be formed four associated Territorial Army battalions, designated as Royal Fusiliers, but which were not units of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London) Regiment. Just to complicate matters, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the London Regiment was also known as the City of London Battalion.***

**Although the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers Regiment, also identified as the 7<sup>th</sup> (Special Reserve) Battalion, was formed in the London Borough of Finsbury in August of 1914, it was almost two years later – in July, 1916 – that, having taken ship in Southampton, it disembarked in the French port-city of Le Havre for service on the Continent. Three days after landing, on July 27, the Battalion was attached to the 190<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division\*.**

***\*This formation had been the idea of Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty at the time; days after the outbreak of war it was decided to organize the numerous volunteers for the Royal Navy who were superfluous to its needs into an infantry division.***

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**During the early days on the Great War, units of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division had participated in the fighting withdrawal from the Kingdom of Belgium, particularly during the defence of, and the retreat from, the city of Antwerp. The operation had not been a resounding success and Antwerp had fallen to the invading Germans who had then gone on to occupy all of the country but a small south-western area of the province of West Flanders.**



**(Right above: *The coat-of-arms of Belgian Flanders – photograph from 2010*)**

**Months later, at the end of the month of April, 1915, the 63<sup>rd</sup> was one of two British Divisions to participate with Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) and French forces in the landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula.**



**(Right above: *Anzac Cove and the murderous heights above it is one of the two theatres where the Naval Division fought in Gallipoli in 1915. – photograph from 2011*)**

**(Right: *The second area where the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division served during the Gallipoli/ Dardanelles Campaign was Cape Helles at the western extremity of the Peninsula, seen here from the Turkish defenders' perspective. – photograph from 2011*)**



**Having been evacuated from the ill-fated Gallipoli venture, the 63<sup>rd</sup> (Royal Naval) Division was not to be called upon again for a further ten months. When it was, it was to be thrown into the turmoil that was the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme; this was to be on October 8 when it took over positions in the area of the Redan Ridge in the vicinity of the small community of Mailly-Maillet.**



(Right below: *The re-constructed village of Mailly-Maillet is twinned with the community of Torbay in the District of St. John's East. – photograph from 2009*)

In the weeks preceding this move, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, had been stationed in the north of the country, in sectors to the west of the battered coal-mining centre and city of Lens. In mid-September it had begun training for... *Open Warfare – Extended order drill, attacks, Reconnaissance, Bayonet fighting & Physical Drill being the chief practices.* (Excerpt from 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, War Diary)

At first individual the individual companies and then the entire Battalion as a whole trained before continuing on a Brigade, then Divisional basis.

On October 3 and 4 the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion travelled south by train to Varennes from where it then marched to Mailly-Maillet. It had arrived at *the Somme*.

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

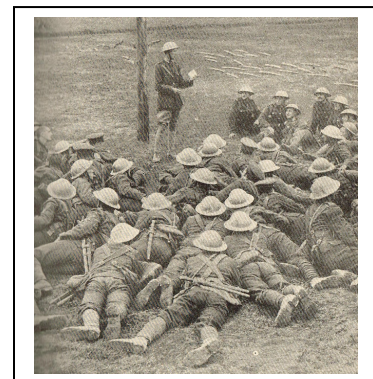
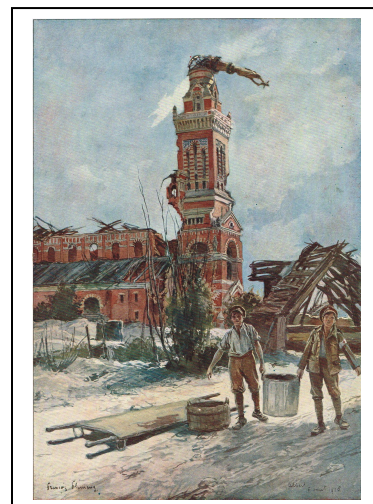
(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

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

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

(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 (see below), September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)

(continued)



After a first three-day tour in the trenches the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, was withdrawn from the front to a series of areas where it was to provide working-parties and carrying-parties until the end of that October. It was then ordered back into the trenches in the area of Hamel – one of the two components, logically, of the commune of Beaumont-Hamel which had been wrought into the history of the Dominion of Newfoundland on the preceding July 1.

*\*In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was – and is still – a commune. At the time of the Great War it comprised the two communities of Beaumont and Hamel, perhaps two kilometres apart: Beaumont was behind the German lines - until November of 1916 - and Hamel was behind the British lines.*



*On July 1 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment fought on ground between the two villages, land that was a part of the Commune.*

*A third community was later appended to the Commune: this was the village of Beaucourt, also behind the German lines in July of 1916, and which was still being fought over in early 1917 (see below).*

*(Above right and far right: Proof that Beaumont and Hamel are two separate communities, albeit in the same commune. – photographs from 2010 & 2015)*

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be involved on two occasions in major operations – in fact, the first was *intended* to be major but finished otherwise: a raid had been planned, on November 7, on the enemy trenches opposite, but the wire had not been cut and the attackers found the early going very difficult. Moreover, a raid had been delivered on the prior evening by one of the units neighbouring the 7<sup>th</sup> – but no-one had been informed.

On that November 7 the Germans had therefore been alert and had met the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion with a hail of rifle and machine-gun fire, with trench mortars and artillery-fire. The officer in charge wisely decided to abandon the attack and the raiders withdrew whence they had come with minimal casualties.

The second occasion had been on November 13-14 when a conventional attack on enemy positions had been undertaken. The wire in front of the German trenches had again been a problem but on this occasion there was to be no order to retire. Ground was won and the newly-acquired positions were consolidated: the numbers of casualties incurred during this episode, all told, were forty-one *killed in action* and three-hundred forty-three *wounded and missing*.





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

This operation by the combined forces of several British units had been one of the last of the official *1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme* – in most sources shown as November 18 - the Battle having nominally concluded on that date although the fighting did *not*.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, however, had already begun its march away on November 16 when it retired to the village of Englebelmer; on the days following it was pulled back further, to Beauval and then to the west of Doullens.

(Right: *The quiet country town of Doullens through which the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, passed in November of 1917, at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



The unit then turned northwards and passed behind the battered city of Arras to reach its destination of Saily-Bray on November 24. The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was now to remain in this area for the next seven weeks.

With the conclusion of the *1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme* there was then to follow a period of calm of several months during which the belligerents rested. Both sides also needed to re-organize and – more importantly – to re-enforce. The French had incurred two-hundred thousand casualties\*, the Germans approximately four-hundred fifty thousand\*\*, and the British (and Empire/Commonwealth) forces about the same.

*\*And, in fact, their attacks had been for the most part, relatively successful.*



*\*\*There would have been many fewer German losses if their commanders had not persisted in counter-attacking on each and every occasion that ground had been lost.*

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

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, had been re-enforced even as it was making its way from *the Somme* to Saily-Bray, three drafts for a total of some two-hundred forty *other ranks* reporting to *duty* during that period. Once the Battalion had been settled at Saily-Bray, more new-comers were to arrive and to take their place in the depleted ranks.

Units such as the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, even though withdrawn from the forward areas, were far from being inactive: inspections, route marches, training by section, platoon, company and also as a complete battalion, parades for numerous reasons (church, awards, visits by *the brass*), musketry, lectures, familiarization with new weaponry, bayonet-training, assault-course exercises, intra-unit competitions, sports, the occasional concert, saluting drill... Busy - but at least they were just not being shot at.

In mid-January, after having moved up to deliver an attack on German positions in conjunction with infantry of the Honourable Artillery Company – the War Diarist appears not to have made note of any casualties, but he has told us that it snowed on that January 11 - the Battalion had immediately been posted back to the region of *the Somme* – and to an area with which it was already familiar – the trenches at Beaucourt.

When not in the line the unit was to be based at Forceville, Martinsart and Miraumont where it had arrived after a week's march from Sailly-Bray. For the next two months it was to undergo the daily grind of the rigours, routines – and perils – of life in the trenches\*.

*\*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 being the nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*

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

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



At the end of the third week of March the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, having been ordered out of the forward area, commenced its move back to a northern sector, to Busnes to the north of the town of Béthune. Having arrived there on March 27, there for twelve days the unit was once again to undergo training. On April 8 the Battalion marched to Marles-les-Mines, a distance of some twenty kilometres (twelve miles)... *Very heavy march for the men... Billets good. Must be prepared to move at 2 hours' notice.* (Extract from War Diary entry for April 8, 1917)

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



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

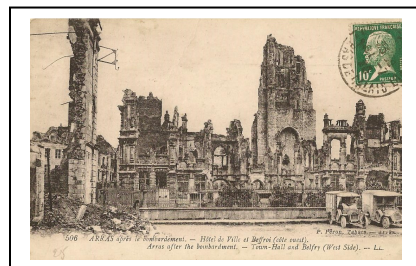


(Preceding page: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to be among the attacking forces of the first few days of the *Battle of Arras*. On April 11 it again marched, on this occasion to La Compté from where, three days later again, it was bussed to the city of Arras. Having left any superfluous equipment in the Battalion Transport Lines, the unit then proceeded during the late evening of April 14 into the trenches at Bailleul\*, just to the north-east of the city, where the War Diarist recorded... *Very bad trenches. No shelter for the men...but also...Exceedingly quiet*. The tranquillity was not to last.

*\*There are several Bailleuls in northern France, including the large town by that name on the Franco-Belgian frontier. The one to which the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched on this occasion is a much smaller community, Bailleul-Sire-Barthoult.*

(Right: *The City Hall of Arras with its bell-tower was to look like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)



For the next week, apart from the constant patrolling that is recorded in the War Diary, the Battalion remained in the relative shelter of the trenches; the troops were likely happy to do so as apparently – apart from on the day of its arrival - the enemy artillery-fire was fierce all during that period. Despite the comparative safety, casualties for that first week still amounted to eighty-four all told.

On April 20 the unit was ordered to be relieved. However, due to heavy shelling and to the proximity of the enemy positions, two platoons of the Battalion were unable to withdraw until the following day. Worse was to follow: having retired, the unit was almost immediately ordered to prepare to return to take part in an attack on the village of Gavrelle which had been planned for April 23. If consolation there were, it was that during the few hours spent out of the front lines... *The men settle down to rest & have plenty of hot food.*

The 63<sup>rd</sup> Division was about to play its role in the *Second Battle of the Scarpe*, an action which was a planned part of the *Battle of Arras*. It was an attack astride the River Scarpe on a front of some fourteen kilometres and the village of Gavrelle was the northernmost limit of the assault.

The attack by the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun at zero hour, at a quarter to five on the morning, as planned; however, it had also been planned that the enemy wire be cut which – once more – was not the case. Nor was the stubborn resistance of the enemy counted on, again not for the first time.

But it would seem that the attack was eventually to be considered by its planners as a success: by mid-day of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the village of Gavrelle had been captured and the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division had taken almost five-hundred prisoners. The casualty count for the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, had been three-hundred fifty-three, all ranks, *killed, wounded and missing.*

(continued)

The Germans mounted determined counter-attacks, as was their habit, on April 28 and 29 against the newly-acquired British positions at Gavrelle; however, the defences held and the Germans were to suffer heavy losses.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved on the final day of the month and ordered to the rear area near to the villages of Écurie, a two-hour march away. The strength of the Battalion at its retirement is documented as having been – compared to regulation battalion strength of approximately one thousand – seventeen officers and three-hundred thirty-eight *other ranks*.

It was not to be until May 20 that the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was once more called upon to man the front lines; in the meantime there were to be days of training and courses to be followed at Écurie, Écoivres and at nearby St-Éloi. As well was the manning of working-parties and carrying-parties for tasks that were often the lot of troops withdrawn to the rear for rest.

(Right: *Écoivres Military Cemetery today holds within its bounds just over twenty-five hundred dead of the Great War: Canadian, British, French and four German.* – photograph from 2016)



When the orders came, the unit moved forward to the area that it had abandoned only weeks previously: Bailleul-Sire-Barthoult, where it was to begin its current tour in reserve. Thus once again the Battalion was to submit to the drudgery of trench warfare – but it was perhaps more desirable than the much over-esteemed thrill of battle experienced only three weeks earlier.

The front-line trenches at nearby Oppy, reserve at Ste-Catherine and Divisional Reserve at Roclincourt were succeeded by a move to a new camp at St-Éloi where the Battalion personnel – those who remained after an exodus by a number of men and officers to specialist courses – underwent training on the nearby range and bombing-ground.



(Right above and right below: *The village of St-Éloi at an early period of the Great War and a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1793\* – are visible in both images.* – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)

*\*A second source has 1783 but 1793 appears to be more historically likely as by that time the French Revolution was well underway.*

This posting continued into the first days of July when the Battalion underwent final exercises in order to exhibit its newly-gained expertise – no reaction from the officers judging the staged attack is documented. Three days later again the unit was in support trenches in the vicinity of Bailleul Station and, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month, it moved into front-line positions near Gavrelle.





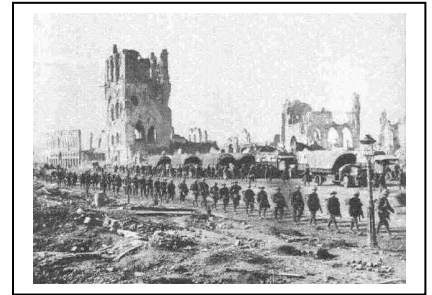
By this time, of course, the focus of British operations for that summer had been switched from the area of Arras back to the *Ypres Salient* in Belgium. While the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was in the reserve area at Ste-Catherine, on June 7<sup>th</sup> the British detonated a series of nineteen charges under the Messines (today *Mesen*) Ridge – the entirety claimed to be the largest non-nuclear man-made explosion of all time.



It is recorded that some ten-thousand German troops were lost during the twenty seconds that the explosions lasted.

(Right above: *One of the many craters, Spanbroekmolen, left by the mines detonated under the Messines Ridge just before the attack, has been transformed into a lake named Lone Tree Crater and also the Pool of Peace. Six mines were not fired for various reasons and remain underground to this day. – photograph from 1914*)

The short-lived *Battle of Messines* – fought from June 7 to 14, 1917 - was in itself a success. It, however, had been planned as the opening phase of a larger campaign and *the Salient* at Ypres had been selected by the High Command to be the theatre of that British summer offensive\*.



*\*Officially named the Third Battle of Ypres, the campaign came to be known to history as Passchendaele, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was one of the British Army's objectives.*

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

The aforementioned success at Messines, unfortunately for the British, turned out to be a two-edged sword. The shattered ground had obliterated any roads, tracks or even foot-paths, to such an extent that it was to be a further six weeks before it became logistically possible – nothing could be moved forward until the broken area had been repaired - to launch the second phase of the operation. Thus it was that the debut of *Passchendaele* proper had to be postponed until July 31.

In the meantime, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to remain posted in those sectors between the two centres of Arras and Lens. It was not to be until the beginning of October that it was ordered transferred from France to cross the frontier into Belgium. By that time\*, Private William Wesley Martin was in France and would surely have reported *to duty*.

*\*September 22 is the date on which he was documented as being on active service: in layman's terms, this is the day that he set foot on the Continent.*

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Like its predecessor of the previous year – *1<sup>st</sup> Somme* – the battle called *Passchendaele* was a lengthy expenditure of human life that gained very little, and even *that* gain was to be only a temporary acquisition.

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



On September 26 and 27 two drafts of re-enforcements reported to swell the depleted ranks of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers: one-hundred four other ranks on the former date, and seven officers and three-hundred twenty-eight other ranks on the 27<sup>th</sup>. These are the only new-comers recorded in the War Diary during this period, thus it was likely on one of these two occasions that Private Martin joined his unit.

The Battalion had moved back from the front line only days before this, on September 24, to the vicinity of the community of Ourton. There it had remained for a week until October 2 when it had marched to the railway-station at Ligny, there to entrain for the northern town of Cassel where it underwent training while awaiting orders. These arrived on October 6 – Private Martin's Battalion was to move towards Belgium on the morrow.

It was a rainy October 7 that saw the unit march to the western frontier area, to Houtkerque, where a lack of billets saw many of the personnel quartered in tents. This not-so satisfactory situation was to endure until October 24, much of the interim having been spent in training, when the Battalion was moved by bus – *record time for the embussing 2½ minutes...says the War Diarist* – to a series of camps in the neighbourhood of Vlamertingue, west of Ypres.



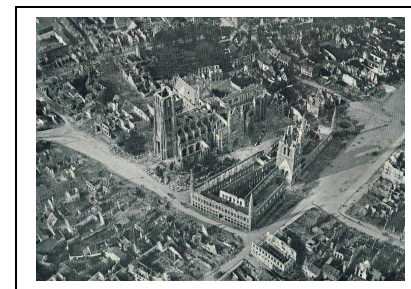
Training resumed.

(Right above: *British troops boarding requisitioned London buses in the area of Ypres, albeit at an earlier period of the war – from Illustration*)

On October 28... *Further orders received. Coys (Companies) held inspections of arms, rations, etc. Further conferences for C.O.s at Bde. H.Q.*

*Bn proceeded to line to relieve HAWKE BN. at 3.30 pm. Line reached without casualties & relief complete by 11-30 pm. (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry of October 28)*

(Right: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)



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On October 29 the Commanding Officer of the Battalion reported to Brigade Headquarters to converse about the attack that had been planned for the following day.

During his absence from his unit, somewhat ominously... *the Divisional Gen. (General) arrived & wished the Bn. all good luck, adding he did not think we should meet with much resistance.* (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry of October 29)

Unfortunately they *did* meet with resistance, particularly from the German artillery which hit the attackers as soon as they left their jumping-off positions, from the machine-guns situated in several strong-points – and, as the generals themselves acknowledged on this occasion, from the mud. The British troops, particularly those of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division – its casualty count to be over three thousand from October 26 to 31 - were unable to keep to the agreed time-table and thus other more successful units found themselves more and more isolated as they advanced.



(Right above: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele, this is the ground fought over during those final days of October and first weeks of November of 1917.* – photograph from 2010)

(Right: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)



The Divisional General's well-intentioned wishes for good luck notwithstanding, Private Martin's 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, by the time of its relief on October 31, had incurred an all-rank casualty count of sixty-three *killed in action*, one-hundred twenty-six *wounded* and fifty-one *missing in action*. (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry of October 31)



(Right above: *An area of Tyne Cot Cemetery wherein lie just fewer than twelve-thousand dead – until after the Armistice only three-hundred forty-three had been buried there - of whom more than eight thousand remain unidentified. On panels which form the north-eastern boundary to the place, are recorded the names of some thirty-five thousand whose last resting-place is unknown.* – photograph from 2010)

While other units of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Division were to continue the struggle in a further offensive of night attacks from November 1 to 5, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, (*City of London*) Regiment – by now at fifty per cent regulation strength - was to be withdrawn... *Irish Farm was reached after an unpleasant journey from the front line, in which the battalion passed through a gas belt in addition to harassing fire kept up on the tracks...* At twenty minutes to two in the afternoon ...*The battalion entrained at ST JEAN & proceeded to POPERINGHE, which was reached by 5-0 pm. All were billeted in the town.* (Excerpts from Battalion War Diary entry of November 1)

According to the same source, during the two succeeding days the *...men devoted their time to bathing and cleaning-up.*

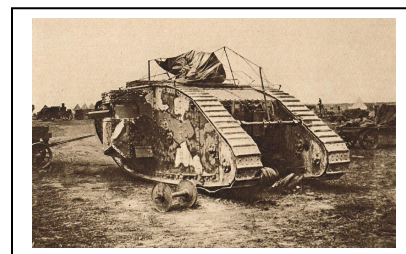
Thus Private Martin and his unit terminated service at the *3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres*. For two weeks the Battalion remained in Belgium to train in the area of Poperinghe before once again withdrawing, further to the west on this occasion, across the border into France to the area of Zeggars-Cappel where the training continued.

On November 28 the unit was ordered back to the frontier area – for yet more training - and to the already-visited community of Houtkerque where many of the personnel had been obliged to spend an uncomfortable seventeen days in tents due to a lack of billets. On this occasion, due to the local barns now being full of harvested wheat, available billets were even fewer in number, thus more personnel than before were to crowd into tents.

The only consolation for Private Martin was, perhaps, that *this* time only eight days were to be spent there.

The Battalion was now to be transferred to the south, to the area to the rear of where the two-week *Battle of Cambrai* had recently been fought from November 20 until the early days of December. Briefly summarized, *Cambrai* had been as much a very large-scale raid as it had been a full offensive.

The British had used tanks en masse for the first-time there, and on the first days they had proved to be unstoppable. In fact, the advance was to proceed so rapidly that: firstly, it outran the supplies, artillery and infantry reserves – of which not enough were available; and secondly, the British, so used to failure, to stale-mate or to limited gains, had conceived no plans of what to do in case of success.



While the British High Command was busy scratching its collective head, the Germans were reacting, sealing the gaps and then counter-attacking.

(Right above: *One of the early tanks – in the beginning they were to be called ‘land-ships’ – awaiting servicing at a depot in the area of the Somme – from Le Miroir*)

By the official end of the campaign on December 4, the British had relinquished as much ground as they had initially won. In fact, the transfer of Private Martin’s Battalion to that area had been to forestall any further advances by the counter-attacking Germans.

It was to the area of Metz – not the northern city of that same name, but a village (Metz-en-Couture?) to the south-west of the aforementioned large centre of Cambrai – that the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was posted by December 16. Its first two weeks there were relatively peaceful: on the penultimate day of 1917 this was to change.

On the morning of December 30 *...after a furious barrage of enfilade fire, the enemy entered our front-line trench, attacking in white camouflage suits which effectively prevented their approach being seen in the snow...*

*The three companies in the front line...all suffered heavily, all of the officers and most of the men of 'D' Company being taken prisoners... Our counter-attack did not succeed... (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry for December 30).*

There was a further altercation on the next day, although not on the same scale, by which time the remnants of the unit had fallen back into the support lines – the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion by then counted a total in the trenches of only one-hundred seventy-eight all ranks\*. These survivors were now amalgamated with the remainder of the similarly-depleted Artists' Rifles unit of the London Regiment to form a composite battalion which immediately advanced into the front-line positions until it was ordered to be relieved on January 4. It then it fell back to Metz.

*\*Many of the one-hundred ninety-eight reported as missing in action on this occasion were believed to have been taken prisoner.*

The composite battalion, by now having received some two-hundred re-enforcements, returned to the front line on January 13 in a so-called counter-attack area. Nothing of the like was ordered and Private Martin's unit was relieved five days later.



*(Right above: Troops in very shallow, ill-prepared, front-line positions somewhere in France during the winter of 1918 – from Illustration)*

Four days later again, moving by light railway and then on foot, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was withdrawn to Beaulencourt, just south of Baupaume, there to further re-enforce – this becoming increasingly difficult by this stage of the Great War – to train and, according to the War Diary, to play football.

Private Martin and his comrades-in-arms were to remain at Beaulencourt until the middle of the month of February when, augmented by a company of the Artists' Rifles, they once more moved forward into the lines, near to the village of Ribecourt, to resume life in and out of the trenches.

February saw few losses counted by the Battalion and so it continued into the next month, even though the enemy's artillery was reported to be stepping up its activities. Then in the entry for March 11, is to be found the following: *Attack by enemy expected daily. Work carried out on defences with all possible speed... On the next day there was reported to be a ...very heavy gas bombardment all along the front and back areas...and on March 13 was entered...large numbers of officers & men found to be suffering from effects of gas and are evacuated to hospital.*

The bombardments increased as did the casualty rate and, on the part of the line held by the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, this was augmented on March 20 by local infantry attacks. These were reported to have been repulsed, but fifty casualties were reported for that day.

The next day was to be the first day of spring of 1918.

(continued)



Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in that March and April of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans launched a massive attack, designated as Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it was to fall for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops posted there – including Private Martin and the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers.

(Right below: *While the Germans did not attack the northern sectors around Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for some six weeks, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens.

The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.



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

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



In the meantime, however, the *Second Battle of the Somme* was of course far from won – and at times not very far from being lost.

The situation may have optimistically been reported as...*satisfactory*...by the War Diarist on March 21; this nevertheless did not preclude the Battalion being ordered to withdraw twice on March 22.

The enemy continued to advance rapidly using a new tactic, that of the storm-troopers whose role to break through the weak points in the lines, to by-pass any strong-points and thus to isolate them.

By the thus-created very real threat of attack from the rear and the rupture of their communications and logistics, the British were forced to retire and, in doing so, to abandon guns, equipment and stores that were to enable the Germans to follow hard on their heels – or even in places to precede them.



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

Within weeks the advance-guards of the German forces were able to claim to have seen the towers of Amiens Cathedral on the horizon. The capture of this centuries-old edifice may have made good propaganda, but it was the taking of the railway system in and about the city which was the prize that might have gained the final victory. This, however, was to elude them.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued to retire – as did the entire British and Empire (*Commonwealth*) force – across the fields where they had fought only eighteen months before and where they had manned the lines in the winter of 1917. Thiepval, Martinsart, Bazentin-le-Petit, Courcellette: places which had cost thousands of lives to take during the five months of fighting of *First Somme* were overrun in a matter of days, at times hours.

Even the provincial town of Albert with its by-then iconic basilica was to fall before the German onslaught.

(Right: *The town of Albert as it was in August of 1918, four months after its capture by the Germans, and now re-taken by Canadian forces – from Le Miroir*)



On the final day of March, Private Martin and his Battalion were digging a new trench line at Englebelmer, a village which had been situated three kilometres behind the British line on July 1, 1916, the first day of the *First Battle of the Somme*. Ten days earlier the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers had been defending positions some forty kilometres to the east – days which had also cost the unit a total of one-hundred fifty-four *killed, wounded and missing*.

In the southern areas of the German offensive, the enemy was to continue to make gains, perhaps another thirty or so kilometres before being halted; but for the British troops in and around the area of Englebelmer, this was to be about as far back as they were to be pushed.

On April 5 and 6, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was engaged in a major defensive struggle with the enemy at Aveluy Wood, one of many such small, dense forests – and was apparently so at that time - surrounded by farm-land which dot the country side. A terrific fight ensued when the Germans, having advanced along the railway line and road, reached the level of the wood which fronted onto the western side of the railway. In order to continue the advance, the Germans had to clear the wood of the British.

Thus they attacked. The 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion during much of the action was in hastily-prepared positions in reserve to the rear of the wood, and it had been two Royal Marine Battalions on which had fallen the responsibility of holding the front-lines. The weight of the German attack had at times broken through the Marines but then it was Private Martin's unit which stood in their way.



There was to be no major break-through at Aveluy Wood, and this particular enemy advance was halted.

*(Previous page: A veteran of the Second World War in the company of his grandson during a visit to the German cemetery at nearby Achiet-le-Petit – photograph from 2009(?))*

Relieved after this action in which the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion had incurred a further two-hundred seventeen casualties all told, on the night of April 7 the force pulled back into Brigade Reserve in the area of Forceville. There at least some of the personnel remained for the next four days – a working-party of two-hundred man was unlucky enough to draw duty at Englebelmer to work on that same defence line.



*(Right above: A photograph of a Canadian working-party carrying supplies of all kinds to the troops in forward positions – from Le Miroir)*

And it was to Englebelmer that the entire Battalion proceeded when it was next posted to a forward position on April 11. Even then there were working-parties required, on this occasion for wiring the new front line. But there was no reported infantry action, enemy activity for the days of this short, four-day tour being restricted to that of his artillery.

Re-enforced while posted into Corps Reserve at Léalvillers, to the west of Englebelmer, for the ensuing week it appears to be that working-parties and carrying-parties were becoming ever-increasingly inevitable on the infrequent occasions when training was not ongoing. Then again, it must not be forgotten that the German threat was still very real.

Talmus, even further to the west than Lealvillers, was the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalions' next stop. There, further working-parties were the order of some days, rifle drill that of others, added to which were parades for the awarding of promotions and decorations – as well as a boxing competition. And by the end of that month of April, 1918, the unit, while not at full strength, in total now numbered over nine-hundred.

Private Martin's Battalion remained at Talmus for the first week of May. Since the previous year, the Germans had been employing two new types of gas: phosgene and mustard. Gas masks – known as *box respirators* – had been a part of the soldier's equipment since 1915 and were now being adapted to counter these new threats. Thus the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to undergo training at Talmus, on top of which were organized parades through gas chambers to measure the efficiency of these apparatus and also the composure of those wearing them.

*(Right: The very first protection against gas had been to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here in 1915 being tested by Scottish troops. – from either Illustration or Le Miroir)*



(continued)



The unit moved forward on May 7 and Private Martin was back in the line two days later. The German advance was by now slowing and in places – such as to the immediate left of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion's position - the British were now counter-attacking. On this occasion it apparently failed, but at least the order of the day was no longer a retreat, although Private Martin's unit *did* spend the days of this tour in defensive work: wiring.

During the next two-week period, from May 13 to 21, the Battalion was in support, working and carrying once more, apparently having been ordered to build a new 190<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters facility. On the latter date it was back in action once more in the same sector from which it had been withdrawn just days before. On this occasion there was more to be done than stringing wire.

On the night of May 21-22 the Germans sent forward bombing-parties to attack the Battalion positions; they were driven off, but the unit was ordered to organize punitive counter-attacks to re-capture a lost machine-gun position. Offensive patrols were then sent out to which the Germans responded with further local attacks during the very-early morning of May 23. The enemy efforts apparently failed.

The next retaliation was on the night of May 24-25, a larger-scale raid on enemy positions with elements of several battalions other than the 7<sup>th</sup> involved. On this occasion it was the Germans who appear to have successfully repulsed the British efforts, a counter-barrage just after the beginning of the advance causing numerous casualties.

The final riposte by either side appears to have been that of heavy enemy artillery activity on the afternoon of May 26, a period of gun-fire during which... *Nos 3 & 4 posts have been badly knocked about...they have since been manned & consolidated.*

On May 29 Private Martin's Battalion retired from the forward area to the vicinity of Forceville. On the following day the unit had a bath before... *4 Offs & 200 O/Rs supplied for work on a cable trench.*

The casualty count for that month of May, 1918, had been thirty-one *killed in action*, one-hundred four *gassed and wounded* and six *missing in action*. Of these, a goodly number – unrecorded – had been incurred during the incidents of May 21-26. None were reported on either May 30 or 31.

It thus seems to be uncertain, if the above information – gleaned from the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, War Diary – is reliable, when exactly it was – despite the official date shown below - that Private Martin was *killed in action*.

The son of Thomas Martin, former worker with, later (at least by 1922) Colonel of, the Salvation Army in St. John's, Newfoundland, and of Leah Selina Martin (née *Perrett*), he was also brother to William-Bramwell (deceased at the age of one day), of Edith, Beatrice, Amy, Florence-Catherine and of Thomas-Herbert.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Thomas Martin, his wife Selina, with William Wesley (to the left in the photograph), Florence-Catherine and Thomas-Herbert – from Ancestry.uk*)

Private Martin was reported as having been *killed in action* on May 30 as on his headstone (if certain other information is correct, then on May 31 – or perhaps on neither) of 1918 while serving in trenches in *the Somme*.

Born in Sgundsvall, Sweden, likely on August 15 of 1898 (another source has January 1 of the same year), he died at the age of nineteen (or twenty) years.

Private William Wesley Martin was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

(Right: *The photograph of Private Martin is from the Ancestry.uk web-site*)



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – February 18, 2023.