



Private Simon Leonard Mason (Number 222040) of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in LaPugnoy (sic) Military Cemetery: Grave reference III.C.11.

(Right: *The image of the 85th Battalion emblem, worn as a head-dress cap badge, is from the Wikipedia web-site*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *mechanic*, Simon Leonard Mason has left behind him little, if any, information pertaining to his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia*. The only thing that appears to be certain is that he was to be found in the capital city, Halifax, during the month of September of 1915, for that was when and where he enlisted.

**It appears that he had been in the Royal Naval Reserve and discharged from there; however, no further documentation seems to be available.*

It was on the 28th day of that September that Simon Leonard Mason presented himself for a medical examination – to be found... *fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force* – then enlisted and underwent attestation by the Second-in-Command of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) by which unit he was taken on strength – to ‘C’ Company - on that same day; according to his regimental number, he was the newly-authorized 85th Battalion’s fortieth recruit.

The formalities of Private Mason’s enlistment were brought to a conclusion some three weeks later, on December 20, when the Commanding Officer of the 85th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Borden, declared – on paper - that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with correctness of this Attestation.*

The 85th Battalion had its headquarters in *the Armouries* at Halifax and it was in this vicinity that the unit began training as of October 14, 1915. While ‘A’ Company was to be quartered in the Armoury building itself, the other three such units – and thus Private Mason – were to encamp on the adjacent *Common* for the next several months, until wooden huts had been constructed.

By the following spring, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at *Camp Aldershot*, Nova Scotia, where the *Brigade* then spent the entire summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

On October 11 of 1916, the thirty-four officers and one thousand one *other ranks* of the 85th Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., embarked onto His Majesty’s Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. On that same day the 185th and the 188th Battalions were also to march on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.



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

On October 13th - at about eleven o’clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to file up the gangways before *the vessel* was to cast her lines and set her bow towards the open sea.

One of the largest ships afloat at the time, for the trans-Atlantic passage *Olympic* was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18, six days later, and the troops disembarked on the following day. The 85th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the county of Surrey. There were now to follow several more months of training.

The organizers who had envisaged the formation of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* had expected that it would serve as a whole in *active service* on the *Western Front*: this was not to be, the *Brigade* being disassembled in December of 1916. Three of its four battalions were now to remain in the United Kingdom, there to be employed as reserve units to furnish re-enforcements for the depleted Canadian battalions on the Continent.

The 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) was to be the exception.

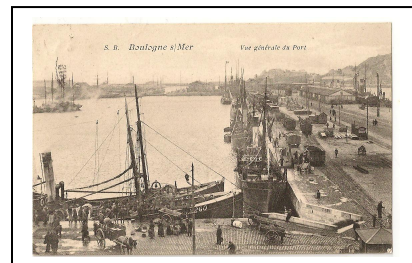
The unit, having been stationed at *Witley Camp* for just under four months, passed through the English-Channel port of Folkestone on February 10 to embark on His majesty's Transport *London* for passage to the Continent. The Battalion then disembarked at noon of that day in Boulogne to march to the nearby *St. Martin's Rest Camp*.



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

By February 14 it had travelled inland to report to Gouy-Servins where it remained in training until the second day of March.

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



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

A goodly number of sources at this point in the 85th Battalion's history appear to err, often by *omission* it must be said, rather than by *commission* - the author pleads guilty of the same mistake. While these sources record the Nova Scotia unit as being with the 12th Brigade of the 4th Division, this omits the fact – confirmed by the 11th Brigade War Diary – that it was as an element of this *latter* formation that the 85th Brigade served until after the action of April 9 on *Vimy Ridge*:

Excerpt from 11th Brigade... *Operational Order No. 51 issued at 11.15 a.m., 12.1V.17 – On relief the 85th Bn will pass to command of G.O.C. 12th Brigade...*

(continued)

It appears that the 85th Battalion as an entity moved forward to the front line for the first time only on April 8. It apparently had been officially designated as a *working unit*, to be employed in reserve. However, due to its Commanding Officer's insistence, it had been undergoing exercises for several weeks before, training on prepared sites at *Bouvigny Huts* - and in meticulous fashion – and its officers briefed on the upcoming operation.

This insistence by Lieutenant-Colonel Borden, and these preparations, was to stand Private Mason's Battalion in good stead for what was to follow.

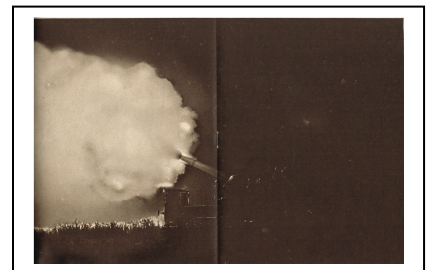
What was to follow, of course, was the Canadian attack of April 9, 1917 on *Vimy Ridge*, an operation in which the 85th Battalion was to play a conspicuous role late in the afternoon.

However, prior to this as yet unforeseen duty, the duties and tasks of the 85th Battalion on that day were – as recorded by the Battalion War Diarist - as follows: *Construction and filling Dump at Strong Points 5 and 6; Construction of deep dug-out...; Digging C(ommunication) T(rench) from front Assembly Trench...; Party to carry wire and assist Brigade wiring party on construction...; Party to carry forward ammunition for Stokes Guns; Prisoners of War Escort Party; Battle Police...*

As the final days before the attack had passed, the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier, on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion describing it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn threw retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy. Even while still at the *Bouvigny Huts*, the personnel of the 85th Battalion must have been well aware of the immensity of the operation – its first - which lay before it.

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

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

On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive not only at *Vimy Ridge*, but also in a large area to the north of the *Somme* battlefields of the previous year; this was the *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere.

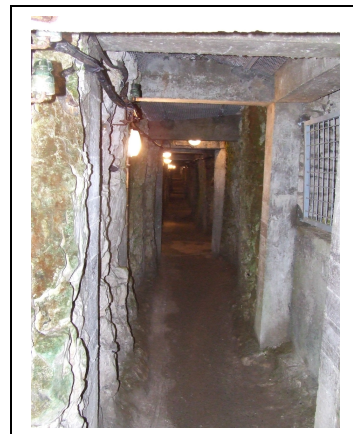


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In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being that Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

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

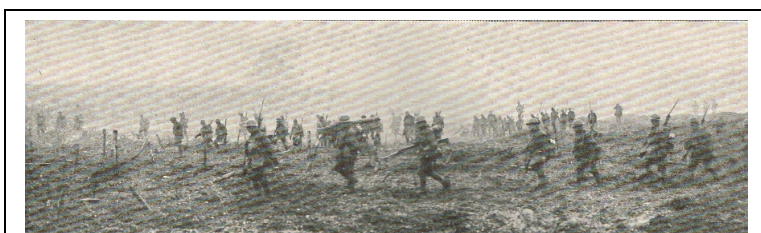
(Right: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)



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.

The attack on *Vimy Ridge* had taken place on the opening day of the five-week-long *Battle of Arras*. The days and weeks that followed were to be less auspicious than had been April 9 and 10, and the realities of life in the trenches took hold once more. That early success was not to be repeated until the summer of 1918.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, equipped – or burdened - with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man’s-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



Now the caprices of war were to play a role. At three o’clock on the afternoon of April 9, the C.O. of the 85th battalion had been ordered to despatch two of his four Companies, one to each of the 87th and 102nd Battalions whose assault was being jeopardized by the enemy from positions on top of the crest. He was also ordered to be in position with the rest of his command at half-past four in two of those well-known tunnels for further orders.

Those orders arrived thirty minutes early: *BATTER trench...is strongly held by fresh enemy... Will attack it with 2 companies of 85th...*

4.15 p.m. – G.O.C. (General Officer Commanding) arranges assault on *BATTER...by 85th Battalion...*

6.30 p.m. – 85th Battalion attacked without a barrage, and reached their objectives without much opposition. (Excerpts from 85th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)



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

Apparently the objectives in question were known collectively as *Hill 145* which, once taken, was consolidated into a strong-point by the 85th Battalion. Today the Canadian National Memorial at *Vimy Ridge* stands atop it.

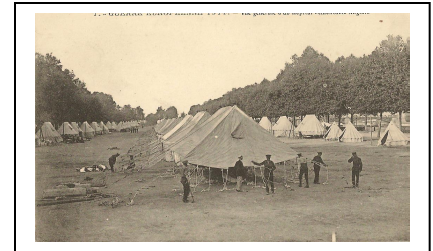


(Right: A part of *Vimy Ridge* and the *Canadian National Memorial* as seen from *La Chaudière* in what was on April 9, 1917, *German-occupied territory* – photograph from 1915)

On April 13 the 11th Brigade was relieved and the 85th Battalion moved back to the *Bouvigny Huts* where it had been quartered in March. From this time forward, until the end of the *Great War*, it was to serve as a component of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade (see *Operational Order* further above).

It had been during those days – the exact date appears not to be among his files - while *in action* on *Vimy Ridge* that Private Mason had incurred gun-shot wounds to the abdomen. He had eventually been evacuated from the field to the 18th Casualty Clearing Station in the vicinity of the community of *LaPugnoy*.

(Right: 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 often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



The son of Paul Mason, fisherman, and Teresa (sic) Mason* (*née Corcoran*) – to whom as of October 1, 1916, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - of *Riverhead, St. Mary's Bay, Newfoundland*, he appears to have had no siblings.

**His later records (pension and allowance) have been amended by the authorities to record Teresa as his wife. However, that is his mother's name (as records and cemetery prove) and his attestation papers show him as having been single.*

**Also, there appears to be a large discrepancy between the ages of his parents engraved in stone in the *Riverhead cemetery*, and those recorded by the censor of 1921.*

Private Mason was reported as having *died of wounds* on April 15 of 1917, by the Officer Commanding the 18th Casualty Clearing Station.

Simon Leonard Mason had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-four years: date of birth, November 17, 1890, at *Riverhead, St. Mary's Bay, Newfoundland*.

Private Simon Leonard Mason was entitled to the *British War Medal* (left) and to the *Victory Medal* (*Inter-Allied War Medal*).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to *criceadam@yahoo.ca*. Last updated – January 25, 2023.