

Private John Matthews (also found as *Mathews*) (Number 463999) of the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference 24-26-28-30.

(Right above: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *bushelman* – a person who repairs and alters garments - Alfonso Matthews has left behind him *some* little information *a propos* his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. The most pertinent of all is perhaps that the 1911 Census shows him as married to Jean M.G. Porter, born in Ontario, the couple residing at 1517, 4th Avenue West in Vancouver, and having a daughter, also Jean, five years of age at the time of the Census. The couple was to have a second child.

John Matthews' parents had also by this time moved to British Columbia, they were there as early as 1901, as the Census of that year shows his parents and four of his siblings – but not him - already living in Vancouver*. In fact, some fourteen years before, on June 6, 1887, Elizabeth, the mother of the family, had left St. John's, Newfoundland, on board the ship *Polina* for Québec with four of her children: Sarah, Elizabeth (*Eliza*), John and Alonzo.

**While some later documents have the parents and children born in England, the 1901 Census has...Place of birth NFL...marked alongside each of their names. Even that of Emma who was born nine months after the voyage of the Polina.*

While the destination of Elizabeth and the two girls had been documented on the ship's passenger list as the Ontario community of Orillia, brothers John and Alonzo apparently had had other plans. Despite their young age, they were on their way to perhaps Garry River, also in Ontario – while *Garry* is correct, the second word seems illegible. The reason is not documented.

All else that can be said with certainty is that John Matthews was in the region of the Okanagan community of Vernon during the month of August of 1915, for that was both the time and the venue of John Matthews' enlistment.

It was on August 14 that he presented himself at Vernon for a medical examination, a procedure which pronounced him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. He then apparently attested although it was not until ten days afterwards, on August 24, that his oath was confirmed by a local magistrate. However, by that time Private Matthews was reported as having already been *taken on strength* by the 62nd Battalion (*British Columbia*).

Then it was to be yet a further seven weeks and a day before all of the formalities of John Matthew's enlistment were brought to a conclusion when, on October 13, the Second-in-Command of the 62nd Battalion, Major Alexander Graham, declared – on paper – that...*John Matthews, having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private John Matthews* was to train with the 62nd Battalion in two locales. Having begun to recruit on June 2, 1916, many of the men having been former soldiers of various Vancouver Canadian Militia units, the unit then mobilized on July 1, the volunteers being sent inland to Vernon for initial training**. However, as of that October, *Hastings Camp* in Vancouver became the site of the Battalion's preparations for overseas service.

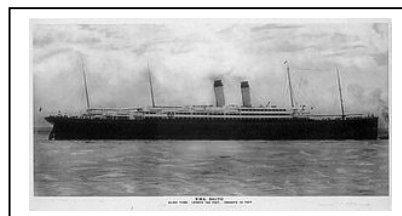
**A further source cites trained soldiers joining the unit from the camp New Westminster, but gives no dates.*

*****It would seem that Private Matthews may for a while have held the rank of Lance Corporal: he is referred to as such on two forms on which he assigned pay to his wife; on his pay-roll records of May and June 1916 – although this has been scratched out and replaced with Pte.; and on the 62nd Battalion's official and original Nominal Roll. No other details appear to be available.***

A medical record cites the...*Date of Arrival at the Station* (the station presumably being Vancouver)...of Private Matthews as November 2, 1915. The document in question was a record of the time that he had spent receiving attention to a hernia in a Vancouver hospital: from February 8, 1916 until the 26th day of that same month. He was still in that city when he passed in front of a medical board on March 11; it found him fit for overseas service four days hence.

On October 1 of 1915, a Reinforcing Draft from the 62nd Battalion had sailed for the United Kingdom from Montreal on board the SS *Scandinavian*. Once at its destination its personnel had been despatched to re-enforce Canadian units already in service in England and on the Continent. The parent unit of the Battalion which had remained in Canada was nevertheless hopeful that *it*, once having crossed the Atlantic, would be sent intact to active service on the *Western Front*.

It was not to be until the following year, on March 15, 1916, that Private Matthews – in fact, both Privates Matthews – boarded a train in Vancouver for the cross-continental journey to the east-coast port of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Having arrived there on March 20, the Battalion embarked onto the by-then requisitioned White Star Liner *Baltic* for passage across the ocean.



(Right above: *The image of the SS Baltic, at one time the largest passenger ship afloat – is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

The thirty-six officers and one-thousand thirty-seven *other ranks* of the 62nd Battalion were not to travel alone: also on board for the voyage were to be the 56th Canadian Infantry Battalion, the Number 6 Canadian General Hospital, a party of cadets from the Officer Training Corps, and three civilian doctors destined for Army service.

They were now all to remain on *Baltic* in the harbour at Halifax for the next eleven days. Their vessel was to be a part of a convoy comprising the ocean-liners *Baltic*, *Adriatic* and *Empress of Britain*, to be escorted by the venerable Royal Navy armoured-cruiser *Carnarvon*. The convoy, however, did not sail until April 1.

It took some eight days to complete the crossing to Liverpool. Upon its arrival in England the 62nd Battalion was transported by train to the county of Kent and to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, located in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone on the Dover Straits. For Private Matthew's, the posting to *Shorncliffe* was to last three days short of seven weeks.



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

At that time, on the night of May 25-26, Private Matthews was one of a draft despatched by the Battalion to re-enforce Canadian units already serving on the Continent. This practice was to continue and the 62nd Battalion's anticipation of *active service* as a single unit was to come to nought: on July 6, 1916, its remaining personnel was absorbed by the 30th Canadian Reserve Battalion.

The 62nd Battalion was officially disbanded in December of 1917, some seventeen months later*.

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

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

Having passed through the nearby harbour at Folkestone and then Boulogne, its French counterpart on the coast almost opposite, Private Matthews was transported on May 26 to the Canadian Base Depot in close proximity to the French industrial port-city of Le Havre, located on the estuary of the River Seine*. There he was *taken on strength* – on paper – by the 14th Battalion (*Royal Regiment of Montreal*) and underwent final training and organization before being ordered to seek out his new unit.

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

****According to the Canadian Base Depot War Diary, only sixty-five newcomers reported to duty at Le Havre on that day.***

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

(continued)



Eleven days after his arrival at Le Havre, on June 6, orders were issued and Private Matthews left the Base Depot en route to the 14th Battalion. He was one of one-hundred twenty-eight re-enforcements to be despatched on that day, possibly all to the 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion.

It was on the morrow, June 7, that a reported re-enforcement draft of one-hundred fifty* *other ranks* joined the 14th Battalion which was at the time, serving in Divisional Reserve, awaiting the orders to play its part in the ongoing fighting of the time known as the *Battle of Mount Sorrel*.

**What the source was of the discrepancy in the numbers – twenty-two other ranks - is not certain; it may be that other personnel returned from leave, from attachment to another unit or from hospital on that date but this, of course, is only speculation. Nothing else appears to be recorded on the documents available.*

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The 14th Battalion (*Royal Montreal Regiment*) had by that June of 1916 been serving on the Continent for twenty-eight months, since February of 1915, as an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (First) Canadian Division*. It had at first served in northern France in the *Fleurbaix Sector* just south of Armentières, before having moved across the Franco-Belgian frontier and into the *Ypres Salient* in April of that same 1915.



**Before the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division in September of 1915 it had simply been designated as the Canadian Division.*

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



Now, only a bare two months after its arrival on the Continent, and only a matter of days after having arrived in the *Ypres Salient* – some units had not even completed the transfer - the Canadian Division was to distinguish itself during the imminent *Second Battle of Ypres* in that spring of 1915.

(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division just to the south of the village of Langemark stands where the Canadians withstood the German attack at Ypres (today leper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from Illustration*)

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On April 22, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the Germans had released a cloud of chlorine gas in front of French colonial troops at the northern end of the *Ypres Salient*. The gas had reportedly caused some six-thousand casualties in a very short space of time and had provoked a rout of the stricken defenders.

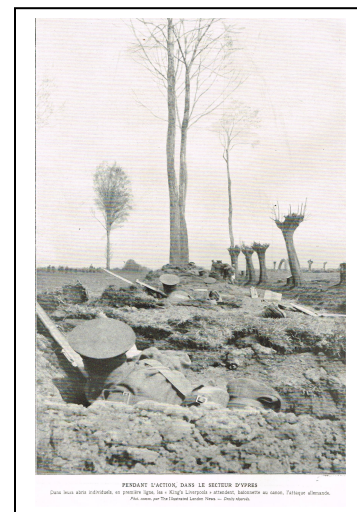
The Canadian troops, holding the line just to the right, not affected to the same degree, had been ordered to fill the void left by the retreating French troops in order to forestall a German break-through.

For its part, the 14th Battalion had been called into action on that April 22, the first day of the German attack, and had taken up defensive positions to the north-east of the city, at *Wieltje**.

(Right: Troops, in this case the Liverpool Regiment, in trenches in the Ypres Salient: These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration)

**Up until this date the Battalion War Diary had been a neat, detailed journal; as of April 22 it is a hastily-scribbled effort scratched in pencil, promising that the details will be appended at a later date. If nothing else, it shows the desperate situation of the next few days.*

Companies of the 14th Battalion then had made a stand with the 13th Battalion at *St-Julien* for the next two days before being obliged to retire by the force of the German artillery activity. On several more occasions on the following days, particularly on April 24, the Battalion – and the Canadian and British forces in general – were to retire to a series of reserve trenches.



By the evening of April 28, several Canadian battalions had fallen back to hold the west bank of the *Yser Canal*, a waterway running roughly north-south to the north of Ypres and into the city itself.

(Right: The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after elements of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn to its western bank – west is to the left – photograph from 2014)



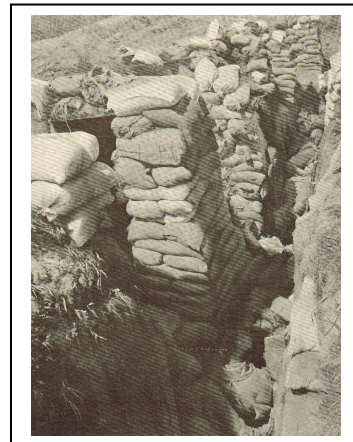
The unit was ordered forward again to support the Essex Regiment on May 2, but the British unit held its positions and the 14th Battalion was able to retire to its transport lines on the night of May 3-4. On the evening of the 4th it was on the move once more, on foot in a south-westerly direction to the area of the northern French town of *Bailleul* where it was to spend several days to re-organize and to re-enforce.

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Only ten days after that withdrawal to Bailleul, the 14th Battalion was ordered to march southward towards Béthune. Having lost its way, the unit marched all that night of May 14-15, for twelve hours, until after daylight before finding its billets. Two days later, on this new front, it was to be fighting once again.

Towards the end of March the British had responded to a French demand for support during their upcoming operations planned in the Artois region; thus the Canadians had been ordered south of the Franco-Belgian border in May to the area of Festubert and, in June, to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée.

(Right: *German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth captured by the French at their Pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorrette – Over one-hundred thousand French troops became casualties during this campaign in the Artois. – from Illustration*)



At Festubert the British gains were to be negligible, an advance of some three kilometres, and during the ten days that the action had lasted, the British High Command was to manage to shatter what remained of its small, professional Army. There was also a lot of good will lost with the Indian and Canadian troops who also incurred heavy casualties* – the Canadians particularly so after their losses during the recent 2nd Battle of Ypres.

**The Meerut Division losses totalled twenty-five hundred and the Canadian Division some twenty-two hundred. Those of the 14th Battalion had been reasonably light, however, sixty-seven all told.*

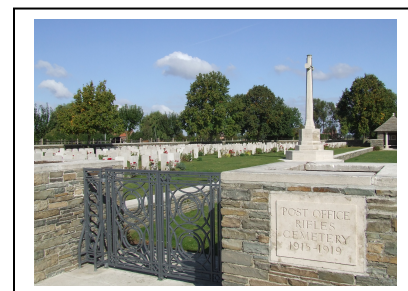
(Right: *A one-time officer in the Indian Army pays his respects to the fallen at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)



**The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

At the end of the month of May the 14th Battalion marched away from Festubert to rest billets at Oblinghem, in close proximity to Béthune. Unlike other Canadian units it had not been involved in any offensive actions and consequently its losses had been light.

On June 6 the Battalion had marched from those rest billets and had relieved the 10th Canadian Battalion in the trenches at Givenchy. Four days of inactivity followed after which the unit retired to rest billets in Béthune. Having then stood by as of June 15 for four more days, the Battalion moved forward into reserve trenches near Le Quesnoy and forward positions in Givenchy itself before withdrawing – once more relatively unscathed - from this theatre of conflict on June 24.



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(Preceding page: *The Post Office Rifles Cemetery at Festubert wherein lie some four-hundred dead, only one-third of them identified. – photograph from 2010*)

****Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.***

By July 5 the unit had pulled back to the north, on foot, to the area of the frontier and was in the trenches with the 1st Canadian Division in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just on the Belgian side of the border.

(Right below: *Some of the farmland just outside the community of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

The 1st Canadian Division – and thus the 14th Battalion - then remained in the border area – testing the recently-invented *gas helmets* was now to be one of the Battalion’s duties – until the following year.



During the fourteen-month period of 1915-1916 now to be spent in Belgium, there were only two occasions on which units of the Canadian Divisions were to be required to fight concerted infantry actions, both of them to be contested in the spring of 1916.

(Right: *Scottish troops wearing the new ‘gas helmets’ – from *Le Miroir)**

The first was to be the fighting during the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters* and the second, the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel; otherwise there was to pass more than a year of nothing other than the routines and rigours of trench warfare**.**



****In only the second of these engagements was the 14th Battalion to any extent involved.***

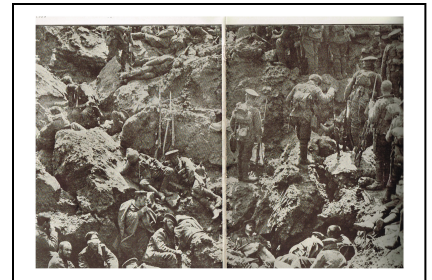
*****During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either *Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve*, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.***



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

(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)

The Action of the St. Eloi Craters officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines; these tunnels they had then filled with explosives which they detonated on that March 27.



(Right above: Advancing in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine, perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration)

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to enjoy no more success than had their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th, when the battle was called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.



Some six weeks afterwards, from June 2 to 14 was then fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps.

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

(Right: 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)



The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.

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



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

Badly organized, the operation was a horrendous failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(Right below: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014*)

As for the 14th Battalion, on the first day of the German attack, June 2, the unit had been serving in Divisional Reserve. However it was soon called forward to the area of Zillebeke to where, during the night of June 2-3 it advanced in individual companies and details. Advancing again on the following day during those catastrophic counter-attacks, the unit had incurred very heavy losses – three-hundred seventy-nine *all ranks*.



On June 4 the 14th Battalion was relieved and retired, leaving behind two officers and fifty *other ranks* – all volunteers – to bury the dead.

The 14th Battalion War Diarist also recorded the following: *A large reinforcement of 150 men arrived on June 6th, and these were largely drawn upon to make up working parties of 150 sent out the following day*.*

**The record of Private Matthews’ draft of one-hundred fifty arriving on June 6 (above) is from an appendix found in the War Diary; the date of June 7 (seen further above) is from the War Diary itself.*



Before the assault took place the Regiment received a further 300 reinforcements and was again called upon to furnish large parties for difficult and dangerous jobs...

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

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What exactly were the newcomers’ first duties with the 14th Battalion is not sure. However, in view of the losses that had been incurred only days prior to Private Matthew’s and his brother’s arrival – they reported in the same draft – it is fairly safe to assume that they were soon parcelled out to the depleted Battalion Companies and, as seen above, then assigned to those work-parties.

On the night of June 12-13, 1916, a Canadian attacking force had moved into its assembly positions and had gone over the top hours later, well before dawn of the 13th. The 14th Battalion was not a part of the fighting force but it was to accompany these troops during the assault.

Its tasks had been many and varied: carrying small arms ammunition and bombs; stretcher-bearing and evacuation of wounded to dressing-station; supplying rations and water; wiring and carrying wire; and providing entrenching material – all of this to be accomplished while under fire.

Their casualties are recorded in the 14th Battalion War Diary: nineteen *killed in action*; twenty-two *wounded*; twenty-eight *missing in action*.

The son of John Matthews, sailor, and of Elizabeth Matthews of St. John's, Newfoundland, and later of 1548, 4th Avenue East, Vancouver, he was also brother to Sarah, to Elizabeth (*Eliza*), to Alonzo*, to Ira Jane born in 1886 – did she die young? – and to Emma.

John Matthews the younger, as seen above, was also married, to Jean Matthews (née *Porter*), born in Ontario. The couple, resident at the time of enlistment at 1517, 4th Avenue West, Vancouver – she later at 3053, 8th Avenue West, also Vancouver - had two children, one of them born in 1995 and named Jean after her mother.

Private John Matthews was reported at first as having been *killed in action at Mount Sorrel* during the period of June 13-14. The date was later amended so as to read June 12, 1916.

John Matthews had enlisted at the age of thirty-seven years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, November 9, 1878 (from attestation papers) – the 1911 Canadian Census records the year as 1877.

**Private Alonzo Matthews (Number 463321), also of the 62nd then 14th Battalions, enlisted some two weeks prior to his brother. Their short military careers were then almost identical, as was the date of their having been killed in action and their subsequent commemoration on the Menin Gate, Ypres. Private Alonzo Matthews' story also appears among these present files.*

(Right: *The names of Alonzo and John Matthews as they appear together in the stone of the Menin Gate – photograph from 2017*)



Private John Matthews 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.

