

Private John Joseph McCormack (Number 22897) of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (*Eastern Ontario Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a baker, John Joseph McCormack appears to have left few if any details behind him of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Québec, except for the certainty that he was there during the month of September of 1914.

(Right: *The image of the PPCLI shoulder-flash is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

Having undergone a medical examination at the military camp, Valcartier, a month earlier, on August 26, it was in the provincial capital city of Québec on September 29 of 1914 that John Joseph McCormack presented himself for attestation. The day on which he first enlisted is documented in places as being on that September 29; however, two medical certificates suggest August 18 as being the date* and also that his first battalion was in fact the 4th, before the 12th – perhaps transferred to the latter as late as September 29.

**And an early pay-record shows that he was on strength at least as early as September 22 of 1914.*

(Right: The Canadian Army Camp at Valcartier. In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada had been at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – the photograph from The War Illustrated taken during a later year of the War)



It was, however, on that September 29, that the *formalities* of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion when Lieutenant Colonel McLeod, the Commanding Officer of the 12th Battalion by which unit he had been *taken on strength* by that date, declared – on paper – that...*having finally been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

At the time of Private McCormack’s attestation, many of the first Canadian units to travel overseas to the United Kingdom had already embarked onto transport ships. Although some of these vessels were still sitting at anchor at Wolfe’s Cove just upstream from the city of Québec on the day of September 30, by October 3 they had assembled off the Gaspé to travel in convoy across the Atlantic.

The fine time-line notwithstanding, Private McCormack’s 12th Canadian Overseas Battalion is recorded as having embarked at Québec on that same September 30 on board His Majesty’s Transport *Scotian*. Having traversed the Atlantic in the company of thirty plus one* other transports and an escort of the Royal Navy, the ship steamed into the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport on October 14.



(Right above: The photograph of the SS Scotian is from the bing.com/images web-site.)

**The one was from Newfoundland. Whether Private McCormack was aware of it is not documented but, on October 5, as the formation was passing along the south coast of Newfoundland, the small Bowring Brothers’ steamer Florizel, sailed to meet it and to join it, carrying the First Five-Hundred of the Newfoundland Regiment overseas.*

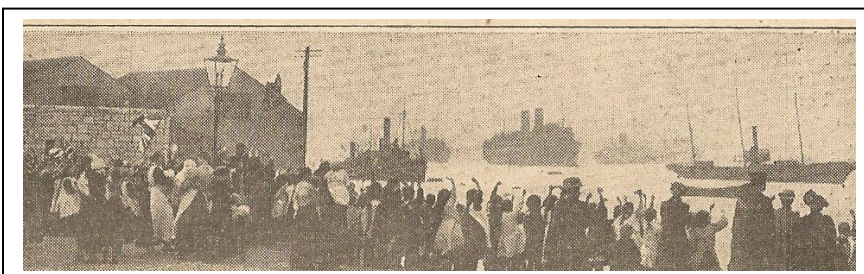
The convoy may have reached its destination; however, such was the poor organization that some troops were to remain on board their ships for several days before disembarking*.

**Apparently a submarine alert had caused the convoy to use the facilities of Plymouth-Devonport, where repairs and construction were ongoing at the time, rather than the port of Southampton further along England's south coast to where it had originally been destined.*

The 12th Battalion was one of those to wait: it was to remain on board *Scotian* until the 20th of the month, six days after the ship had anchored. Hours after the troops finally set foot on land, they were transported by train to the Army Establishment on Salisbury Plain.

Bustard Camp, the unit's destination, was a further five or six hours' march distant.

(Right above: Some of the convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force rides at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914. – from *The War Illustrated*)



The Army Regulations of the day were such that troops were to undergo some fourteen weeks of training from the time of enlistment; at that point they were to be considered as being fit for *active service*. Thus the newly-arrived Canadians were to spend the remainder of October and up until the first week of February, 1915, in becoming proper *Soldiers of the King* – even if they were *colonials*.

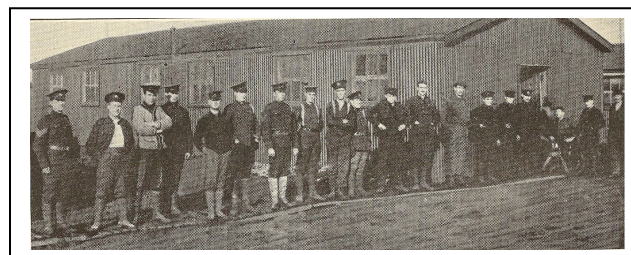


On February 4 the Canadian Division* marched to a review area where they were inspected by His Majesty, King George V and the War Minister, Lord Kitchener**.

(Right above: 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 the bing.com/images web-site)

**Designated as such until, logically, the advent of the 2nd Canadian Division, when it became the 1st Canadian Division.*

***For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener was named in 1916 – it had been called Berlin until then.*



(Right above: *Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire* – from *The War Illustrated*)

At or about this time Private McCormack appears to have been transferred from the 12th Battalion which was now to provide re-enforcements for other Canadian units rather than to play an active role in the fighting on the *Western Front*; so whether he was present at the fore-mentioned royal inspection is not documented.

His pay records for February of 1915 show that the remuneration for his services from the Canadian Army was by then coming via the pay-master of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry to which unit he was soon to proceed overseas from England to the Continent as a soldier of its Second Reinforcing Draft.

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The PPCLI was not to serve with the other *Canadian* forces until November of 1915 when it became a battalion of the then-forming 3rd Canadian Division. Having spent the first weeks of its time in the United Kingdom at *Bustard Camp* on the Salisbury Plain, the unit had been transferred to Winchester on November 16, there to be attached to the British 80th Infantry Brigade of the 27th Division.

Only five days before that Christmas of 1914 the PPCLI Battalion* had marched from Winchester to Southampton where it had embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Cardiganshire* and sailed to the French port-city of Le Havre.

(Right: *The image of HMT Cardiganshire is from The Library web-site. Having survived the Great War, she was sunk in 1940, during the Second World War.*)



The vessel docked in the early afternoon, the Battalion personnel then spending the night in a nearby camp before boarding a train on the following evening, the Battalion War Diarist describing the event...

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



...The whole Battalion had to entrain in one train of 48 trucks. Officers 1, Men 24, Horses 10, VEHICLES 13. Very tight fit, some of the men being unable to sit down.

*The PPCLI was – and still is today – a regiment, a force which may comprise any number of battalions – today, 2017, there are three. Some British regiments, for example, eventually sent twenty or more battalions to serve at the Front during the Great War. Only a single battalion - normally one-thousand strong but during the Great War oft-times often comprising a lesser number - of the PPCLI Regiment ever served at the front.

The Battalion had then travelled northward, to finish detraining at Arques at half-past mid-night on December 23 before then marching for a further two-and-a-half hours to its billets in and in the vicinity of the village of Blaringhem. This community was to be its home for the following two weeks before another two-day march* into Belgium found the PPCLI in the area of Dickebusch (today *Dikkebusch*) just to the south-west of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



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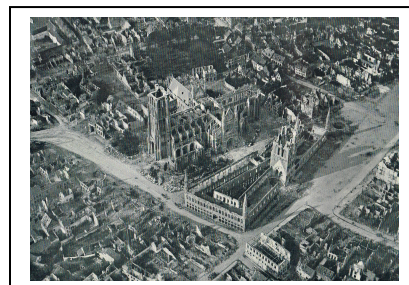
****Some of the Canadian equipment in the early stages of the conflict left much to be desired – apparently both in quality and quantity. The War Diarist wrote of the march that... Lack of boots much felt, many men marching with no soles at all to their boots.***

(Preceding page: Troops – said to be British, but the Canadians wore British Uniforms – on the march in the north of France during the early period of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

The PPCLI Battalion took its place in the line on the evening of that same day, January 6, 1915. Its personnel was soon to learn about the rigours, routines and perils of life – and death* - in the trenches.**

****The first to be killed in action, on January 8, 1915, according to the War Diary, were Number 252, Corporal W. Fry and Number 1284, Lance Corporal H.O. Bellinger, likely victims of the heavy enemy shelling reported during the early morning – although Wikipedia names a Private Guy Dwyer from Hanover, New Brunswick, as having been the Battalion’s first combat casualty of the war on February 4, 1915.***

(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the Great War there was to be very little left standing. – from Illustration)



*****During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former 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 above: 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 – which the PPCLI ad already adopted on November of 1914 – from Illustration)

His documentation shows that Private McCormack embarked in Southampton on February 16, surely on his way to France. Six days later a draft of one-hundred eleven other ranks reported to duty with the PPCLI Battalion while the unit was resting in billets in the Belgian community of Westoutre*.

***A further draft of sixty-six NCOs and men arrived on March 28. If not in the first detachment, he was certainly a soldier of the second.**

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Private McCormack's Battalion remained stationed in the vicinity of Dickebusch while in the forward area, at Westoutre while in reserve, and near to the town of Poperinghe when withdrawn further back into Divisional Reserve. At the beginning of April it moved forward again so that by April 14 it was replacing troops of the Rifle Brigade on the eastern side of the *Ypres Salient*, in trenches in *Polygon Wood*.



At the same time, French colonial troops in the adjacent sectors counter-clockwise were being replaced by troops of the Canadian Division. Some Canadian units were still in the process of establishing themselves in their new positions when the Germans attacked on April 22, for the first time using chlorine gas to precede their infantry onslaught.

(Right above: Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug 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 summer of 1916. – from Illustration)



(Right: The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010)

Close though the positions held by the PPCLI were to the ruptured Canadian and French lines, the Battalion War Diary notes little activity on the part of Private McCormack's unit; by the end of the month, by which time the situation had been stabilized, the PPCLI Battalion was still lodged in Polygon Wood. From April 22 to 30 (inclusive), in contrast to casualties elsewhere, those of the PPCLI had been light: sixty *killed, wounded and missing* all told.

However, eight days later, the unit was to be called upon to resist a major German attack. In an action designated among its battle honours as *Frezenberg*, on May 8 the PPCLI Battalion held the new, hastily-prepared positions of the Bellewarde Ridge all day until its relief at mid-night by the King's Royal Rifles. By then the unit had incurred, dependent upon the source, some four-hundred casualties of which one-quarter were reported as having been *killed in action*.



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(Preceding page: A former non-commissioned officer of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry stands in front of the monument to the Battalion to be found in the area of the Bellewarde Ridge. It commemorates the action of May 8, 1915. – photograph from 2013(?))

The following months, during which the Battalion underwent re-organization and re-enforcement, were spent at first in the area just outside the *Lille Gate* – the southern entrance to the city of Ypres – then later, south again and across the Franco-Belgian frontier, in the vicinity of the town of Armentières.

Then, after a lengthy period in the area of Hazebrouck, withdrawn well away from the forward positions, at the end of September the unit was returned to the front in the vicinity of Lens, there to spend the two following months. The PPCLI would later return to the same area as a unit of the Canadian 3rd Division and the Canadian Corps.



(Right above: The mining village of Loos-en-Gohelle just to the north of Lens as it was already in 1915 – from *Le Miroir*)

These later months of the autumn of 1915 had seen little concerted action by either side, confrontations being rather of a local nature. There had been, of course, a constant stream of casualties, mostly due to the enemy's artillery and also to his snipers. The British and Empire (*Commonwealth*) contribution to the war effort was now growing with Territorial Army units and the battalions of the New Army starting to make their way to the Continent; and further units from the Dominions were also arriving from around the globe to serve in the various theatres of the conflict.

In September of 1915 the 2nd Canadian Division, after months of training in the United Kingdom, had landed in France to take responsibility in Belgium for sectors where, only months before, the PPCLI Battalion and Private McCormack had been serving. And then units of the soon-to-be 3rd Canadian Division began making their way across the English Channel, some serving at the front on an ad hoc basis, until the new parent unit officially came into being.

In November, 1915, the British 27th Division received orders to prepare for transfer to the new theatre of war being established in Macedonia, there to fight against the forces of Bulgaria, that country having recently declared for the Central Powers. The Division's first units began embarking for this enterprise on November 17.

The PPCLI Battalion, however, was not to contribute to this venture in Salonica. On November 8 there was a farewell parade at which time the Commanding Officer of the 80th Brigade, as spokesman for all of the Canadian unit's comrades-in-arms, paid his compliments and offered best wishes in its future endeavours.

Private McCormack's Battalion was to remain at Flixecourt where it had been posted for the farewell ceremonies and courtesies until the 25th day of the month when it marched – accompanied by a fife and drum band - to Pont-Rémy, some fifteen kilometres distant, from where it entrained for the northern French community of Cæstre.

It was there greeted by Lieutenant-General Alderson, Commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and by the welcoming Band of the 1st Canadian Division before marching to its billets two kilometres away.

(Right: *The 'pont' at Pont-Rémy, a stone's throw from the railway station, here traverses the River Somme, another name in both Canadian and Newfoundland history. – photograph from 2010*)

On the morrow morn, that of November 26, the weather gods welcomed the new-comers in their own fashion: with a heavy snow-storm.

It was to be a further seven weeks before the PPCLI Battalion was to be posted to the forward area once more. In the meanwhile it was ordered to the rear areas of Flêtre and La Clytte. In both encampments the unit underwent training, paraded, attended courses, was inspected, went to church, took infrequent baths, marched, was photographed, played football, welcomed re-enforcements, furnished working-parties, had three men wounded by long-range artillery... in fact, just about everything except having fired a rifle in anger.

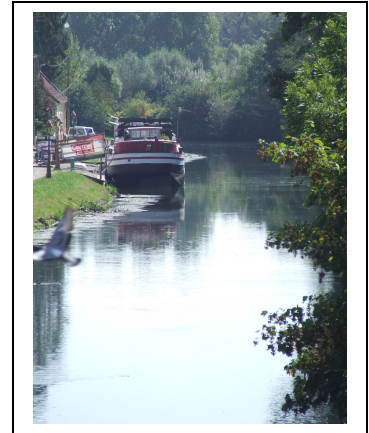
(Right above: *La Clytte (today Klijte) Military Cemetery in which are buried one-thousand twenty-eight dead of the Great War. Two-hundred thirty-eight of them are unidentified. – photograph from 2017*)

The 3rd Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night on the night of December 31 of 1915 and January 1 of the New Year, 1916. The PPCLI Battalion was to be a unit of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, in the company of the 42nd and 49th Battalions as well as the Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment*. Its first tour in the trenches as a Canadian unit under Canadian command began on the evening of January 12.

**The Royal Canadian Regiment, the senior infantry formation of the Canadian Army, also fielded a single fighting battalion during the Great War. This unit was nonetheless usually referred to as the RCR, rather than as a battalion.*

On January 21 Private McCormack was wounded while serving in the trenches. On this first occasion, however, the enemy was not responsible: *A bomb accidentally exploded in the bomb-waistcoat of 51289 Pte Kelly, J.K., Killing the bearer and severely wounding 23561 Pte O'Keefe, A. and 22572 Pte Hanlon, W. and slightly wounding 1716 L/Sgt. Popey W.J., and 22897 Pte: McCormack A.C. who remained on duty; all these men belonged to the Grenade Section.* (Extract from PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry of January 21, 1916)

Private McCormack is not recorded as having required – or as having received - any medical attention to his presumably slight injury. Thus the month of February, all twenty-nine days of it – and the first three weeks of March continued in the same manner, deemed as...*normal*...on perhaps the majority of occasions by the War Diarist. The weather, cited from the same source, was usually...*poor*.



The 3rd Canadian Division up until the middle of March had been working much in tandem with the 1st Canadian Division, learning the ropes in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just to the north of the border with France. On March 21, it was ordered into the area of the *Ypres Salient* to the south-east of the city.

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



The PPCLI Battalion relieved the 3rd Battalion of the (British) Rifle Brigade at the *Railway Dugouts* there in the south-east area of the *Ypres Salient*, not very far removed from where the unit had distinguished itself in May of the previous year.

The German artillery was more active – always – in this sector than had been previously experienced, at least by units other than the PPCLI, but there was little infantry activity other than the incessant patrolling and the occasional raid by both sides.

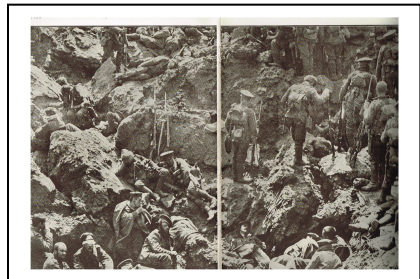
(Right: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014*)



This may have been due to the confrontation ongoing at the time in the *St. Éloi Sector*, now becoming the responsibility of the 2nd Canadian Division. Private McCormack and the other personnel of the PPCLI would likely have been aware that something was happening in that area only because of the noise of the guns; it was not to be directly involved.

The *Action at 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 series of galleries under the German lines, there to place a series of explosives which they detonated on that March 27 and followed up with an infantry assault.

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.



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

The whole affair had come to a conclusion – unsatisfactory from a Canadian point of view – before any other units other than those of the 2nd Division needed to become involved.

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But then, almost seven weeks later at the beginning of June, it was to be the turn of the 3rd Canadian Division to undergo its *own* baptism of fire.

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, in the areas of the village of *Hooge* and other places of English-sounding names such as *Maple Copse*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60* and the afore-mentioned *Railway Dugouts*. They are still referred to by the local people as such today.



(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 were able to patch up their defences. But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was a costly disaster for the Canadians.



(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*)

Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started eleven days before – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.



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

(Right: *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*)



June 2nd, 1916.

At 8.30 a.m. the enemy began shelling our front line and supports. This gradually increased to an intense bombardment from H.E. shells and trench mortars. The bombardment lasted for five hours when it was lifted and an infantry attack followed. The enemy succeeded in capturing the front line of our right company No.1.

The garrison having been almost annihilated. Our left Company No. 2 succeeded in holding their trench and stopped an enemy bombing attack... Our casualties were heavy. (Excerpt from the PPCLI War Diary entry for June 2, 1916.)

The PPCLI Battalion was relieved on June 4 after having been submitted to almost constant artillery fire during the intervening period. The War Diarist on June 4, however, reported that on that day at least... *our casualties were not severe.*

It must have been at some time during those first three days of the German attack that Private McCormack incurred a wound to the head; by the fifth day of the month he had been admitted into the 22nd General Hospital at Camiers for further treatment. There it was decided to transfer him back to the United Kingdom; thus on June 9 Private McCormack was taken on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Newhaven* for the short cross-Channel journey.



(Right above: *The railway station at Dannes-Camiers through which thousands of sick, wounded and convalescent military personnel passed to and from hospital during the Great War – from a vintage post-card)*



(Right: *The image of Newhaven in peace-time livery is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

Upon his arrival in England on that same day, he was forwarded from the ship to the General Military Hospital* in the garrison town of Colchester in the county of Essex where his injury was deemed to be mild enough for him to be transferred on the morrow to Coombe Lodge Auxiliary Hospital at Great Warley for eleven days of recuperation.

**One of his papers names the institution where he was treated as the Ontario General Hospital. However, this was at the time established to the south-east of London in the town of Orpington. Both Colchester and Great Warley are in the county of Essex.*

From Great Warley Private McCormack was transferred once more; on June 21 he was taken into the Woodcote Canadian Convalescent Hospital established by then in the peace-time horse-racing town of Epsom. Five days later again, on June 26, he was discharged *to duty* to the combined Regimental Depot of both the PPCLI and the RCR (Royal Canadian Regiment), at the time based at the major Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, although officially he had been since June 11, on the register and pay-list of the *Canadian Casualties Assembly Centre* office at nearby Folkestone.



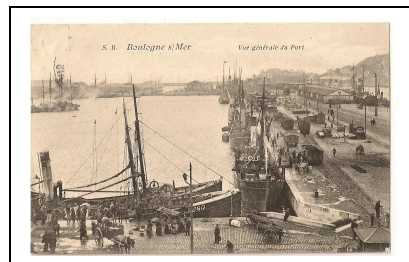
(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 1916)*

There at Shorncliffe he was to remain for some eleven weeks during much of that summer of 1916, until September 7 when he was despatched overseas again, to return to the Continent to the PPCLI Battalion.



Once in France, however, it was still to be a further twenty-four days before he finally reported *to duty* with his former unit.

During those days, having landed in France, likely on a vessel from Folkestone to Boulogne on the French coast opposite, Private McCormack was transported to the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. There he was *officially taken on strength* by the PPCLI but was to wait another nine days before being ordered to the 3rd Entrenching Battalion*. From there he was to eventually be sent to his unit – and also to report to it – on October 2.



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

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

**It had been found that it was more efficient to employ specialized formations – strong physique and experience in such work in civilian life – rather than regular battalions for the task of digging trenches and the like; thus the entrenching battalions came into being.*

Held behind the line to be ready for duty wherever and whenever necessary, they were often used as units to which re-enforcements could be attached temporarily – and yet gainfully employed - until the moment was propitious for these drafts to report to the units to which they had been despatched.



(Right: *Canadian sappers building a road... ‘in liberated territory’ – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

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In the meantime, during Private McCormack’s enforced absence, his unit had continued to play its role in the conflict.

On June 4...*At daybreak the 43rd Bn came up on our right and the 60th on our left but as it was too light the relief was postponed until evening... The Battalion...marched to the Asylum via the Lille Gate and were conveyed to “C” Camp by motor lorry... (Excerpt from the PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry of June 4, 1916)*

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The PPCLI was to play no further role at *Mount Sorrel*. It retired well to the rear westward through Poperinghe and into France where it was to rest and re-enforce. During these days the Battalion War Diary records the unit as having welcomed over five-hundred fifty newcomers, officers and men, thus allowing the reader an idea of the heavy casualties incurred during this episode*.

**It was also during this period, on June 14, that daylight-saving time was introduced into use by the Canadians, British and other Commonwealth Forces.*

The PPCLI Battalion was to remain in the rear area until June 26 when it moved forward to take over responsibility from the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion for the trenches in the area of *Sanctuary Wood*, the scene of heavy fighting only a few days before. This was still an active area, mostly artillery duels but at least one serious enemy attack – repulsed - to the sector just to the right of the PPCLI's 7th Brigade.

The level of intensity of those few days was soon, however, to diminish, and thus was to begin a summer period of the everyday grinding pattern of life in – and out of – the trenches.

In mid-August, units of the 1st Canadian Division had begun to withdraw into France for some two weeks of training; they were in turn, two weeks afterwards, to be followed by the battalions and other units of the 2nd Canadian Division.

During that summer, in contrast to the sectors in Belgium, relatively quiet during that period, it had been much less so elsewhere: the British, other Commonwealth troops and the French had undertaken an offensive in France, at *the Somme*. It had not been an overwhelming success, and the ensuing high casualty rate had necessitated the call to the Canadian Corps to supply re-enforcements to continue the venture.

The *1st Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for some two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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

As the British offensive had progressed, 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 entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



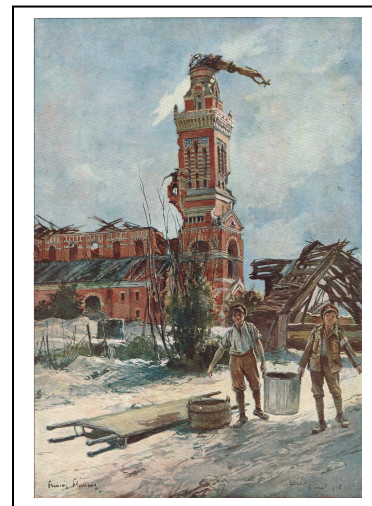
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(Preceding page: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

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

The PPCLI Battalion had been relieved from in and near the ruins of Ypres on August 21 and had retired to the area of Poperinghe where on the next day the priority had been for all to have a bath; on the next it was an inspection of all personnel in... *heavy marching order*.

That marching had come about on the next day again when the Battalion moved to the Cassel training area. After a week of training and parading there, the unit had then moved the seven kilometres or so to Steenvoorde for further exercises before a final evening on September 6 made memorable by a concert.



At half-past five on the next evening the Battalion boarded a train at Esquelbecq having during the day marched the twenty or so kilometres in order to do so. Unsurprisingly, leaving the north of France in the evening ensured an early arrival in the Département de la Somme: four o'clock in the morning at Conteville whereupon the unit marched to its billets at Cramont where it was to undergo a day of... *training and cleaning up*.

On September 10 the Battalion began to march towards its destination close to Albert. The War Diary lists Domart, St-Léger, Pernois, Naours, Talmas, Puchevilliers, Toutencourt and Harponville as being the route which led it by September 13 to the large military encampment of *Brickfields (la Briqueterie)*.

There at *Brickfields* the unit there remained in bivouacs until the early morning of September 15.

Having moved towards the forward area on that morning, at two in the afternoon the Battalion had received orders to prepare to attack at six that evening. It apparently arrived in the area of the jumping-off trench – which could not be found – *at exactly that hour and thus... marched in file through the Barrage & immediately launched the attack & reached its first objective the sunken road running south of Courcelette...* (Excerpt from the PPCLI Battalion War Diary entry of September 15, 1916)



(Right above: *The fields surrounding it once again farm-land, this is the reconstructed village of Courcelette one hundred years and several months after the Canadians attacked it in 1916. – photograph from 1917*)

(continued)

(Right below: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

This first objective consolidated, the Battalion had pushed on and had finally attained its second objective by four o'clock on the next day. There the unit remained until being relieved just before daybreak of the following day again, September 17. By that time the War Diarist was able to report... *All wounded were evacuated and all dead, as far as were known, buried... Total casualties just under 300.*



Withdrawn behind the lines for the next number of days, the PPCLI Battalion provided working-parties and received a draft of one-hundred forty re-enforcements before setting out on a six-day circuitous march, likely to allow the evacuated billets in and near Albert to be occupied by newly-arriving troops who were to be employed in imminent operations. The Battalion marched back into *Brickfields* on September 28.

Then it was again billets in Albert and working-parties until October 2 – the day on which Private McCormack's files, but not the War Diary, have him reporting to *duty* - when it marched into the support lines in the area of Maricourt Wood.

* * * * *

From Maricourt Wood two of the Battalion's Companies were posted to positions known as *Centre Way*, and the two others to *Piccadilly Circus*. Unfortunately, there appears to be no record of the Company in which Private McCormack was serving.

The War Diary entries for October 3 and 4 read as follows:

3/10/16 The supports as described under 2/10/16. Intermittent heavy shelling. Very wet.

4/10/16 As for 2 and 3/10/16. The Battalion was relieved by the 8th Bn South Lancashire regiment at 4 pm and marched to bivouacs on TARA HILL.

The son of Michael McCormack, farmer, of St. Phillips (*Broad Cove Road*) in the District of St. John's East – although his file cites *West - Newfoundland* – then of 21, Scott Street in the city of St. John's itself, he was reported as having been *killed in action* on October 4, 1916, during the fighting at *the Somme*.

The remains of Private McCormack were apparently buried in a shell-hole in the vicinity of Maricourt Wood, near the position which had come to be known as *Piccadilly Circus**. Later on, either the location of the grave had been forgotten or it had been destroyed in subsequent fighting, for Private McCormack's remains were never to be found and identified.

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



****A casualty report cites his unit as being at 'Tara Hill East of Albert after being in trenches west of Courcellette' at the time of the casualty.***

John Joseph McCormack had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-four years: date of birth in St. Phillip's, Newfoundland, (from his attestation papers), October 31, 1890.

Private John Joseph McCormack 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. Last updated – January 26, 2023.