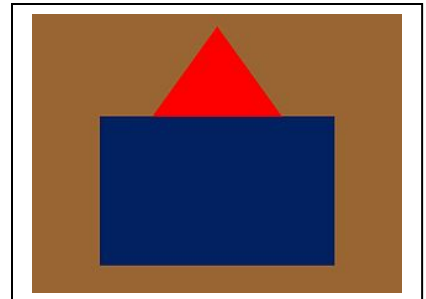




Private James Francis McIsaac (Number 877503) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery*: Grave reference, XVI.A.5.

(Right: *The image of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

****It is also the site of the Australian National Memorial as seen in the photograph above left (not the top).***



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a farmer, James Francis Mclsaac, has left few details behind him of his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. He may have been the young man documented on the passenger list of the SS *Kyle* who was travelling from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on October 19 of 1915, and who was on his way to seek work as a labourer in the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton, but this is as yet to be confirmed.

His place of residence at the time of his enlistment is recorded as the community of Louisburg, Cape Breton, but his attestation papers and other sources cite the venue as having been the mining community of Glace Bay.

His first pay records indicate that it was on March 23 of 1916 that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Mclsaac for his services and that on that date he was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*). It had apparently been, however, on the day before, also at Glace Bay, that he had presented himself for a medical examination, a procedure which had found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*. This had been followed on the same March 22 by his attestation*.

**His papers also claim a period spent with the Canadian Militia, but no details are provided.*

After these initial undertakings, it is almost certain that Private Mclsaac was ordered to report *to duty* for training to the not-distant town of Broughton to the south of Sydney which had recently been transformed into a military camp*.

**Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent on it as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

May 16, 1916, was then to be the moment on which the formalities of his enlistment were officially brought to a conclusion, likely at Broughton. On that date the commanding officer of the 185th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, declared – on paper – that...*877503 Pte. James Francis Mclsaac...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

His posting to Broughton was to last altogether a little less than nine weeks. By that time, 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* in Kings County, Nova Scotia, where the *Brigade* then spent all that summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for overseas service.

At seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of the 185th Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. Earlier that day the 85th and the 188th Battalions had gone on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.

(continued)

(Right below: *Sister-ship to Britannic – that vessel to be sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean a month later, in November of 1916 – and also to the ill-fated Titanic, HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor in the company of HM Hospital Ship Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay, Island of Lemnos, 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 march up the gangways before *Olympic* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. For the trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.



On the date of the ship's sailing, Private McIsaac had received promotion, to the rank of (acting) lance corporal. It was not always the case that those appointed to *acting* ranks received the appropriate pay until confirmed into that promotion, but his pay records show that Lance Corporal McIsaac immediately received the five-cent per day increase due in his remuneration.

Olympic arrived in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 18, some five days later, and the troops disembarked on the following day again. Lance Corporal McIsaac's 185th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards by train to *Witley Camp* in the English county of Surrey.

The 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) is documented as then having provided re-enforcements for Canadian forces already on the Continent. This role was to last until February of 1918, sixteen months later, when the remainder of the unit would be absorbed into the newly-organized Canadian 17th (Reserve) Battalion.

The Battalion's organizers had originally anticipated that the *Cape Breton Highlanders* would be sent – with the other three units of the *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* – into *active service* on the Continent, but this was not to be*. Only the 85th Battalion would eventually proceed to serve in the trenches of the *Western Front*.

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas two-hundred fifty 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.

By the time of Lance Corporal McIsaac's arrival in England, the Canadian Corps had been involved in the *First Battle of the Somme* for two months during which time it had suffered horrific losses. It was to fill the depleted ranks of those battered units that three-quarters of the newly-arrived *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* were to be deployed.

(Right: *Dead of the Somme awaiting burial* – an unidentified photograph)



For whatever the reason – perhaps as a lance corporal he was felt to be indispensable to the 185th Battalion in England – Lance Corporal McIsaac was to remain in the United Kingdom for almost seventeen months. For all except two weeks, this time was to be spent with the 185th Battalion at *Witley*, the other 13 days with the 17th (Reserve) Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) which officially absorbed the 185th on February 15, 1918.

Those transferred to the 17th (Reserve) Battalion also found themselves transferred to another camp. This was the Canadian military complex at *Bramshott*, not far distant to the south in the county of Hampshire.



(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott.* – photograph from 2016)

It may well be, however, that Lance Corporal McIsaac was not to accompany the majority of the 185th Battalion personnel to its new unit. His own records document him remaining at *Witley Camp* – perhaps to assist in winding up the Battalion's operations there. Wherever he was at the time, he was to remain there only until the end of February, for by that time the Army had need of his services on the Continent.

It was apparently at his own request that he returned to the rank of private soldier. And as this request came into force on that February 25, the day of his being *taken on strength* – on paper - by the 25th Battalion, this unit already serving on the *Western Front*, it is likely that the demotion was made so as to enable him to do so.

Private McIsaac is documented as having made the crossing of the English Channel to France on the night of February 28 and March 1, likely through the south-coast English port of Southampton and the French port-city of Le Havre. On that latter date he made his way to report *to duty* to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Base Depot established by that time in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étaples.



He was one of three-hundred thirteen arrivals to the Base Depot on that day.

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

It is unclear on what date Private McIsaac was then despatched to join his unit *in the field*. His records cite March 3, to then join his unit eleven days later, on March 14; but it is unlikely that this is correct as the 25th Battalion at the time was stationed less than one-hundred kilometres distant from Étaples – and mechanized transport was available.

If in fact the date of his joining the 25th Battalion on March 14 is the right one, then Private McIsaac was one of the re-enforcement draft of one-hundred three *other ranks* which reported to their new unit, by then in the rear area in the vicinity of Raimbert, on that day. This draft was logically the one of just over one-hundred re-enforcements which had left the 2nd Canadian Infantry Base Depot on March 10.

Private McIsaac, having enlisted some two years before, was at last on *active service*.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some thirty months by the time of Private McIsaac's arrival, since mid-September of the year, 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including those from the Empire (Commonwealth). This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)



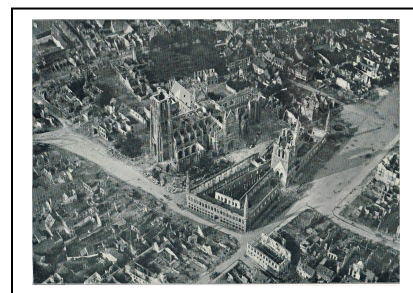
Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25th Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2nd Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. These were in the areas forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel, in that small part of the country which had not by then been occupied by the Germans, and to the south of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



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

(Right: *A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres as early as 1915 – the city is described as 'morte' (dead) - before the arrival of Private Penny – from Illustration*)

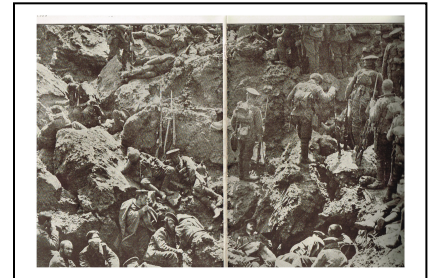


The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916.

(continued)

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It had been at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines beneath the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, had greeted the newcomers who were to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25th Battalion had relieved another Canadian unit in craters and new trenches, and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date.

(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

Six weeks later, in early June, the Battalion had then been involved in the fighting in the area of *Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse*, in the so-called *Ypres Salient* and just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division was apparently to play a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.



(Right above: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914*)

(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hoge, 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*)



From the middle of June up until August of 1916, 20, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.

(Right: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)

Some two weeks later, on the 27th, the unit had been withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moule.

The following week at Moule would be spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.

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

(Right above: *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*)

On that first day of *First 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 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), had been 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. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

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

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.



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

Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916: *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcellette... the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...*

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who had gone over the top on the day of the assault, the 25th Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.

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

**It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

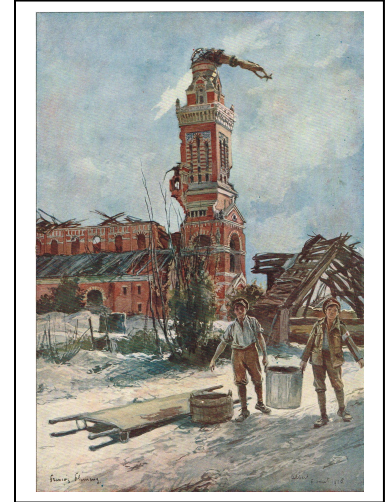
On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as KENORA and REGINA... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

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

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from the *Battle* - and from the area of - the Somme and had made its way westwards and then northwards. It had subsequently passed to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. There the unit was to remain for the following six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay Angres and Bruay.



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



That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25th Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare*; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a welcome respite.

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



(Right above: A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – 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 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 position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the year 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles – from Illustration)

Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the Battalion had been withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, there to undergo intensive training. The exercises were to last until, and including, April 7, only two days before that training was to become the real thing. On the final five days, April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked.

On April 8... *Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position...via cross country route...* (25th Battalion War Diary). It apparently was not to pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

On April 9 in that spring of 1917, the British Army had 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 having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



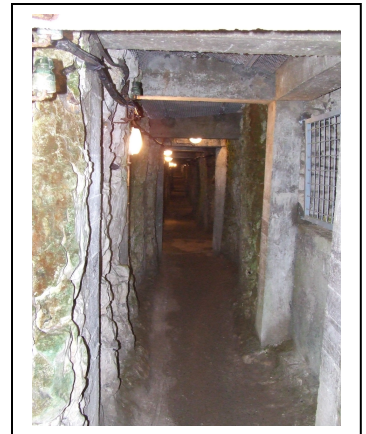
While the British campaign had proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

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

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

The 2nd Canadian Division had not been responsible for the taking of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack.

The Battalion's objectives were apparently soon to be captured and much of the remainder of the day had been spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.



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

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, 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*)



(Right: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)



(continued)

The Germans, having lost *Vimy Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, had retreated some three kilometres to prepared positions in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were to be less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times would be made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks were also to re-claim ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy-en-Gohelle in early May.

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

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift movement of guns and material.



Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breach and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* to be fought in the manner of the first two days and, by the end of those five weeks, little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success. At the time that the *Battle of Arras* officially drew to its conclusion, the 25th Battalion had been withdrawn into reserve, resting and training – if that is not a contradiction – in the vicinity of the community of Gouy-Servins, to the west of the city of Lens.

Now there were to be several weeks before a return to the forward area. Excerpts from 25th Battalion War diaries of July 2 and 3, 1917: *Battalion at BOUVIGNY HUTS. Preparations to relieve 46th British Division, 138th. and 137th. British Brigades, 1/5 Battalion Leicesters and 1/4 Battalion Leicesters. Casualties, 1 Other Rank killed, 9 Other Ranks wounded.*

Relief completed about 2 a.m. – No further casualties were to be documented for the remainder of the day. Thus it was back to business as usual.

The British High Command by that time had long before decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from this area, it had ordered other operations as well to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



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

(continued)

(Preceding page: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

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

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



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

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



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

Objectives had been limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

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

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



Of course, the Germans were not the only ones to have incurred casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion was to retire on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*, fifty of which were apparently incurred on that August 17.

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



While it may have retired temporarily from front-line positions on August 17, the respite was to last not even a day – and the unit had incurred casualties even while withdrawing into those support positions. On August 18 the Battalion War Diarist was to report a unit *trench strength* of just fifteen officers and three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks*.

On the night of August 20-21, the 25th Battalion had relieved the 22nd Battalion in the front line, still in the area of the Cité St-Laurent*. Relieved on the night of August 21-22, the depleted ranks of the unit had retired on foot and by bus to the afore-mentioned community of Gouy-Servins. To the casualty count of August 17, a further seventy could now be added.

**The many pit-heads and their neighbourhoods surrounding the mining-centre and city of Lens were often designated by the term Cité followed by the name of a saint.*

After the weeks of relatively little infantry activity during the early days of that summer of 1917, the attack on August 15 in the area of *Hill 70* and the city of Lens had apparently been intended as the precursor to further weeks of an entire campaign spear-headed by the Canadians.

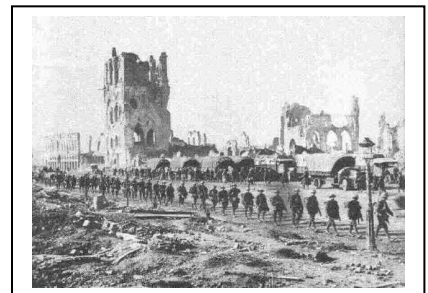
However, the British offensive of that summer, further to the north, in Belgium, had been proceeding less well than had been presumed and the Canadians and the Anzacs* were to be needed there. Activities in the *Lens Sector* had thus been suspended in early September and for a short period, Private McIsaac's 25th Battalion was to revert to those rigours and routines of trench warfare.

**Australian and New Zealand Army Corps*

It was not to be until the final weeks of the month of October that the Canadians were to become embroiled in the British summer – and then autumn - offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign has come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having taken that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British High Command's objectives.

(Above right: *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*)

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



From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it was they who had shouldered a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3, the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions had spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse had been true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the now non-existent Passchendaele village itself.

The strength of the 25th Battalion on that November 5 was to be reported as twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-six other ranks, perhaps some sixty per cent of the regulation peace-time number.

(Right: *The Canadian Memorial standing on Passchendaele Ridge, at the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village – photograph from 2015*)



During the three days that the unit was to spend at the front at this time, the casualties sustained by the 25th Battalion had been, by comparison to those incurred by other units, fairly light: seventeen *killed in action*, sixty-seven *wounded* and six *missing in action*.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions – from Le Miroir*)

During the late evening of November 8 the 25th Battalion had been withdrawn from the area of the front line and had eventually moved to the west of Ypres itself, to the area of the village of Vlamertinghe, and on November 13 back across the frontier into France and south to the area of Neuville St-Vaast, adjacent to *Vimy Ridge*.



It was to remain in this area until, a month later again, on or about December 12, and after having voted in the Canadian General Election, the unit had been ordered to the area of Villers-au-Bois, not many kilometres distant from where it had just been serving.

(Right: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017*)



The winter of 1917-1918 was now to be spent in the same area; little if any confrontational military activity for that period is reported in the Battalion War Diary. But it was, of course, during this period that Private McIsaac and the others of his re-enforcement draft reported to duty on the reported March 14 during the posting of the 25th Battalion to Raimbert.

* * * * *

Only a week after his appearance at Raimbert, Private McIsaac was awarded a first Good Conduct Badge* on March 22.

**In the form of a chevron worn like an upside-down NCO's stripe, it was awarded to those other ranks who had accumulated no misdemeanours during two years of service. Further periods of unblemished behaviour were rewarded by further chevrons.*

(continued)

A single day after this award, on March 23 – and two days following the first day of spring - the unit was moved further south once more, on this occasion to the area of St-Aubin on the outskirts of Arras, to arrive there on the 24th.

The Battalion was then ‘*standing-by*’, ready to move on short notice, owing to expectations of an attack by the enemy.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the enemy launched a massive attack, Operation ‘*Michael*’, on March 21. The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there.



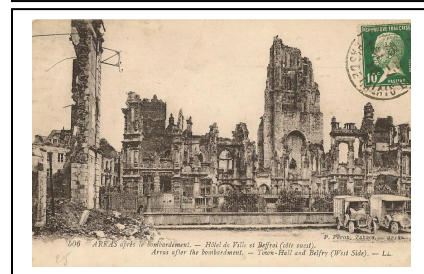
(Right above: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

The German advance continued for a month, 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 the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*

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

The War Diary suggests, however, that the 25th Battalion was not involved in the heaviest – if any - of the related fighting. The unit posted mostly near Wailly*, just to the south-west of the city of Arras, the majority of the casualties incurred were due – as they often were - to enemy artillery activity rather than to infantry action.



**The area just to the south and west of Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive. Unsure as to what the enemy’s intentions were, the High Command moved the 2nd Canadian Division into the area to forestall any attack if and when it occurred. In the event, it did not but during the period of the crisis the Germans stayed active enough to keep the British and Canadians wondering.*

(Preceding page: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery* – from a vintage post-card)

By the end of April the Battalion officers appear to have had nothing more important to discuss than whether or not to adopt the kilt as part of the regimental uniform.

By that time a relative calm had descended on the front as the German threat had faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but had gained nothing of any military significance on either of the two fronts. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

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

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

The 25th Battalion and Private McIsaac remained in the same area to the south of Arras after the crisis, the months of May and June to be spent in relative calm in the vicinity of Neuville-Vitasse; July was likely even calmer as the unit was withdrawn further back to Bellacourt.

(Right: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site)



From time to time, of course, that relative calm was punctuated by local operations, apart from the eternal – so it must have seemed – patrolling, raids by both sides were at times undertaken. One of the more ambitious of those by the 25th Battalion was on June 14.

On that day, according to the Battalion War Diarist...*Weather fine. Situation quiet. The Army Commander, General Sir Julian BYNG wired his congratulations on the successful raid.* On the night preceding, a party of one-hundred forty-six all ranks had raided an enemy outpost line which not only Sir Julian but the War Diarist felt to have been a complete success. Whether Private McIsaac had participated in the venture or not is not recorded among his documents.

The War Diary entry for June 14 continues: *The usual patrols were out, but nothing unusual to report. The garrison worked hard on the trenches, deepening and repairing, during the night.* Thus things had soon been back to normal.

Days before August 8, the intended date of the start of the Allied offensive, the 25th Battalion was transferred to the Bois de Blangy, just to the east of Amiens, and on the main road from there to St-Quentin, from where it then moved forward into the trenches.

The 25th Battalion was not alone: a large number of other Canadian units – indeed the entire Canadian Corps – had at that time begun to move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west of Amiens, then south, then east again to finish in front of the city.

This immense – and complicated - movement was to be effected in only a matter of days, all of the latter stages of it on foot, and these also during the hours of darkness.

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

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

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

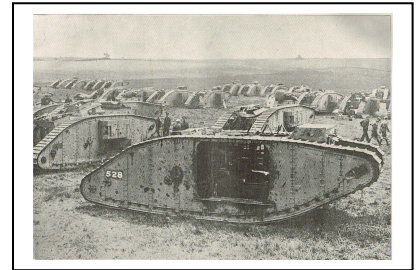
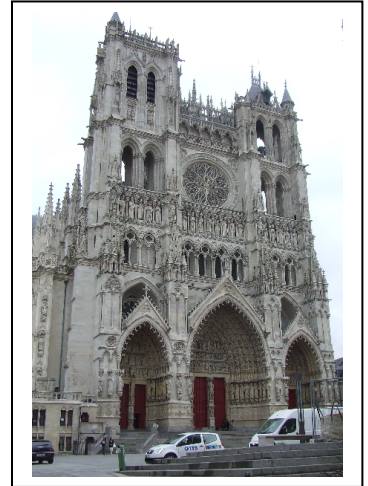
At 4.30 in the morning on that August 8, the advance began – *the Hundred Days* as it became known - which was to bring the *Great War* to a close on November 11. The Canadians were to move forward some twenty kilometres in the first three days of the offensive, a feat unheard of since the autumn of 1914 when the opposing forces had settled into four years of trench stalemate*.

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

(Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry of August 8, 1918) *The weather was greatly in our favour, a thick mist hung over the ground. At 4.20 a.m. our Artillery opened as one gun, our counter-Battery work was especially good, the enemy artillery being forced to cease in half an hour, scarcely a shell falling in our trenches. The plan of the attack was as follows:- ...the 5th Cdn. Inf. Bde. moved up at ZERO plus 1 hour, in artillery formation and formed up on the consolidated line with the 24th Canadian Battalion on the left, 26th Cdn. Battalion on the right, 25th Canadian Battalion in support and the 22nd Canadian Battalion in reserve, the objective being about 1000 yards in advance of GUILLACOURT, which was successfully reached and consolidated about noon, the general line of advance was parallel to the AMIENS-CHAULNES Railway... The mist was so thick that it was impossible to proceed other than by compass, this method was also difficult at times owing to the obscurity of all land marks. Strong opposition from enemy machine gun nests encountered...but were all attended to in quick time... The work of the tanks was also especially good in destroying enemy machine gun nests... At 6 p.m. the 6th Cdn. Inf. Bde. passed through us, together with Cavalry Patrols, exploiting the success. The Battalion remained on the consolidated line until next day.*

The casualties incurred by the 25th Battalion on this first day of the *Battle of Amiens* were eight killed, one-hundred seven wounded and three missing – *all ranks*.

Casualty report: *“Killed in Action” – While advancing with his Company near the enemy front line on the morning of August 8, 1918, he was hit in the head by a machine gun bullet and instantly killed.*



The son of Francis McIsaac* and of Annie (*Anna*) McIsaac (also née *McIsaac*) of Little River, Codroy, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Catherine M. (died young?), to Angus-Joseph, Alexander-Francis, Catherine-Margaret, Elizabeth(?), John-Joseph, Jessie, Archibald, Hector and Neil**.

**Originally from Inverness, Nova Scotia.*

***The list of names of his siblings has been compiled from two different sources and likely is in need of confirmation.*

Private McIsaac was reported as having been *killed in action* during the...*attack from north-east of Cachy to south of Guillaucourt...* on August 8, 1918, the first day of the *Battle of Amiens*.

James Francis McIsaac had enlisted at the *apparent* age of eighteen years: date of birth at Little River, Codroy, Newfoundland, April 2, 1899 (solely from attestation papers).

Private James Francis McIsaac 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.



