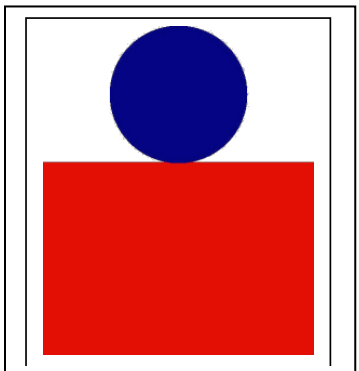




Private William McLaughlin (elsewhere found as *Laughlin* or *Loughlin*) (Number 282161) of the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Barlin Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference, I.F.61..

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, William McLaughlin has left little information behind him *a propos* his movements from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. It is documented on his personal papers, however, that by the time of his enlistment, he had married a Miss Gertrude McLaughlin (sic), also from Newfoundland, who on November 10, 1913, had crossed the Cabot Strait in the company her mother and three siblings on the steamship *Bruce* from Port aux Basques to North Sydney en route to Halifax*.

**Apart from the fact of marriage, the conclusion to this information – that this Gertrude was in fact his wife-to-be - requires confirmation.*

All else that may be said with certainty is that he and his wife were living at 73½, Windsor Street, in the Nova Scotian capital during March of 1916, for this was where and when William McLaughlin enlisted.

All the relevant documents – medical report, attestation papers and his first pay-roll records – cite March 6, 1916, as the day on which he enlisted in Halifax. The attestation and medical examination both were undertaken on that date, with the former procedure – which found him...*fit for service with the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force* – likely preceding his attestation.

The formalities of the entire enlistment process were thereupon brought to a conclusion by the Officer Commanding the 219th (*Highland*) Battalion (*Nova Scotia*), Lieutenant Colonel William Harry Muirhead declared, on paper, that...*Wm. McLaughlin...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.* Private McLaughlin was thereupon *taken on strength* by the 219th Battalion.

Private McLaughlin was recruited in Halifax where the Battalion had its Headquarters and where most of “A” Company was to train – likely at the Armoury and on the adjacent Common. Many other volunteers, however, had enlisted in other communities and several smaller-than-Company-sized units were based around the province and remained there *in situ* to train until the end of May. These smaller groups were then assembled at *Camp Aldershot* in the Annapolis Valley, Kings County. On June 2 the three-hundred thirty-one *other ranks*, Private McLaughlin among that number, and nine officers from Halifax also reported there *to duty*.

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 had begun to assemble to train together at *Camp Aldershot*, where the *Brigade* then was to spend all that summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

For Private McLaughlin the summer appears to have passed smoothly enough although one incident was recorded on his charge sheet: he was assigned a twenty-four hour detention for...*disobeying an order*. No details appear to be available in the records to enlighten us further.

(continued)

On October 12 Private McLaughlin's 219th Battalion and the 193rd Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour at Halifax. At seven o'clock in the morning on the preceding day, embarkation had begun for the 85th, 185th, and 188th Battalions of Canadian Infantry.

October 13 was then to see one-half of the 166th Battalion march up the gangways before the vessel then cast her lines and moved towards the open sea. For the trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.

(Right: *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*)



The vessel 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. Private McLaughlin's 219th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards by train to *Witley Camp* in the English county of Surrey.

The 219th Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) is documented as then having provided re-enforcements for Canadian forces already on the Continent. This role was to last until January 23 of 1917, some three months later, when what was by then to remain of the unit would be absorbed into the newly-organized Canadian 17th (*Reserve*) Battalion.

The Battalion's organizers had originally anticipated that the 219th Highland Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) 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 Private McLaughlin'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.



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

The call for Private McLaughlin was to come sooner than later: he was *struck off strength* by the 219th Battalion on December 5, and on that night – December 5-6 – took ship across the English Channel – likely from the English south-coast port of Southampton to the French industrial port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. On the latter date, December 6, he reported to the Canadian Base Depot at Rouelles, in the outskirts of Le Havre, to await orders.

There appear to be no numbers recorded of either the arrivals at the Base Depot on that December 6 or of the departures on December 7 – although the Depot War Diarist entered in his journal that there had been a performance on that day...*a concert voted to be the best on record so far*. Private McLaughlin likely missed it, having by that time been despatched to join his new unit *in the field*.

One of a re-enforcement draft of one-hundred fifty *other ranks*, he was reported as having reported *to duty* with the 13th Battalion on December 9, 1916, on a day when it was training hard. Ten days prior to this, the Battalion had been serving in the forward area at *Zouave Valley* before having been withdrawn to the rear area at Cambigneul.

Private McLaughlin had arrived on the *Western Front*.

* * * * *

The 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the (1st) Canadian Division*. In mid-October of 1914 the Division had been the first force to arrive in the United Kingdom from Canada and then had been the first Canadian formation to set foot on French soil, which it had done in February of 1915.

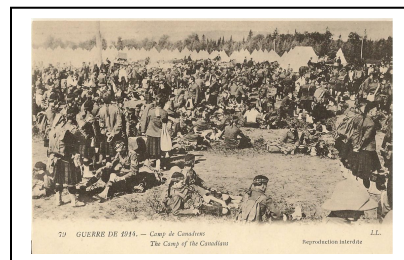
**Until the time that the 2nd Canadian Division was formed – and at times afterwards as well - it was referred to as simply the Canadian Division.*

(Right: *The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the canadiansoldiers.com web-site*)



(Right below: *The caption reads merely ‘Camp of Canadians’ but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit. – from a vintage post-card*)

For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. There, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the situation had been relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13th Battalion had begun to fit into the rigours, the routines – and some of the perils - of life in the trenches*.



**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former 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: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

In mid-April the Division, having moved north into the Kingdom of Belgium, had eventually taken up positions in the Ypres Salient, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the Great War. And whereas the first weeks of the Canadian presence on the Continent had been relatively quiet, the dam was about to burst - although it was to be gas rather than water which, for a few days, would threaten to sweep all before it.

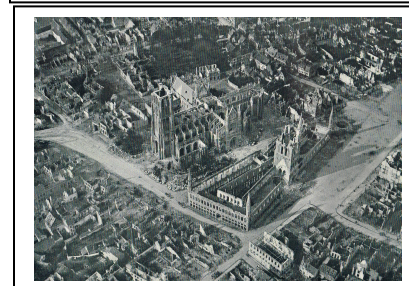
The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right above: 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 conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)

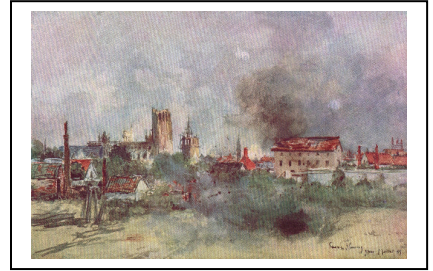
The Second Battle of Ypres was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the Great War. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine had proved overwhelming.

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

(continued)



The cloud had first been noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left at first had wavered, then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered, particularly that of the 13th Battalion which had been obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat by the unit, not always very cohesive, had become necessary.



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

By the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan were to hold until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement was to become necessary. At times there were to be breeches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians had closed the gaps.

The 13th Battalion had been relieved on April 25 and had withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, it had remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it was to be withdrawn into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres. On May 3 the unit had been ordered to retire into northern France, to the area of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.



(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (at the time 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*)

The information to be gleaned from the Battalion War Diary during the period of 2nd Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred was apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5th Brigade War Diary – but it was to be on April 28 that a re-enforcement draft of two-hundred seventy-six *other ranks* had reported to duty to the unit.

On May 13 the 13th Battalion began to move from the area of Bailleul in northern France - where since May 5 it had spent several days reorganizing and refitting - down the front to the south and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks would take place in which the British High Command were to manage to gain some three kilometres of ground but also would contrive to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left by then of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not fielding the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless would be dealt with harshly.

The role of the 13th Battalion had been to relieve the 16th Canadian Battalion after its attack planned for May 20 on a German-held position, and had then further been to consolidate and to defend that same position. Despite heavy losses the 16th had captured its objective, positions which then the 13th Battalion had occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men were to fight and repel a strong German counter-attack before then having been relieved on the following day again.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, were to fare hardly better than the British. Each contingent – a Division - would incur over two-thousand casualties before the offensive had drawn to a close.

The French effort – having used the same primitive tactics - was likewise to be a failure, but it was to be on an even larger scale: it would cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

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

(Right above: A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle to those who fell. – photograph from 2010(?))



On May 22 the 13th Battalion had marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. The reprieve was to last for two weeks, until June 5, when it had been ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert.

Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and incurring many of its casualties, although fewer, due to having repeated the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert – by June 24 the 13th Battalion had been retired from the area. At about the same time, over a number of days, so it had been with the entire Canadian Division.

**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.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 13th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then in Steenwerck, all three of these communities in the vicinity of Bailleul. From there it was to move eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.



(continued)

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

Having reached the area of the town of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 13th Battalion had remained – as had indeed the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it was to come to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.

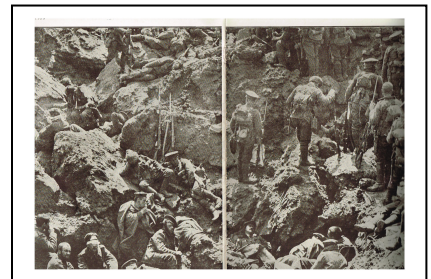
It was to be another eleven months before the 13th Battalion would be involved in any further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were to be fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers would ensure a constant flow of casualties.

In September of 1915 it had been the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the *Kingdom of Belgium*. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent and to the north of the one held by the 13th Battalion and the other units of the now-designated 1st Canadian Division.

This area was several kilometres south of the city of Ypres and it had been there, after some seven months of life in and about the trenches, that the 2nd Division was about to fight its first major action of the *Great War**.

For the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April were not to be as tranquil as those being experienced during the same period by the battalions of the 1st Canadian Division.

****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 a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. This was followed immediately by an infantry assault.***



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

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the 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.

However, as previously noted, this confrontation had been a 2nd Division affair and the personnel of the 13th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery.

(continued)

In late March and April of 1916 the 1st Canadian Division had been transferred from the *Ploegsteert Sector* to that area of *the Salient* comprising the southern outskirts of Ypres. It had still been adjacent to the 2nd Canadian Division, but now to its left-hand and northern flank. And the 3rd Canadian Division – having officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916 – had recently taken over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of *the Ypres Salient*.

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* had then been fought out between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions dominating the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive which was to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, was to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately the enemy had never exploited.

(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 British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was to be a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were never to be delivered – those that did had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to pieces - the enemy had remained where he was and the Canadians had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(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)

On the first day, the events of that June 2 had interrupted what had already been a busy day for the 13th Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports in the afternoon.



Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3rd Division sector, orders had been given... *for the Battalion to 'stand to' and be ready to move at a moment notice... Soon after this the Battalion was ordered to proceed to the support of the Canadian 14th Battalion and made a forced march... to Zillebeke Etang... (Excerpt from 13th Battalion War Diary)*

The 13th Battalion was not to be involved in the disastrous counter-offensives made by Canadian troops on June 3 and had been, in fact, engaged in only defensive activities. Even so, the casualty count for the days of June 2 and 3 had numbered forty-four.

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



On June 4 there had been no concerted action by the Canadians; the 13th Battalion had spent much of its time consolidating positions and sending out reconnaissance parties, all the time having received the full attention of the German artillery. Casualties for June 4 had amounted to a total of forty-eight.

The War Diarist's entry for the 5th day of the month reports no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion. There were to be reported, nonetheless, thirty *killed, wounded or missing in action*.

On June 6 the War Diarist once again reports little activity in the area of the 13th Battalion. Nor does he report – but, then, why should he? – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at *Hooge* village.



(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 spring and summer of 1916.* – from *Illustration*)

At *Hooge* the Germans were then to gain some territory before their advance had been contained. The 13th Battalion was to suffer half-a-dozen casualties on that day.

Late on the night of the 7th, following an uneventful day – by the standards of the time – and with no casualties due to enemy activity, the Battalion had been withdrawn to the south-west of Ypres to arrive in its billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8th.

There the unit had remained until the evening of June 11 when it had begun a march which was to bring the 13th Battalion back to the area of *Mount Sorrel*. There it was to serve in the now-imminent – and ultimately final - assault.

By midnight of that June 12-13, some twenty-eight hours after beginning its return march, the 13th Battalion would be in its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

(Excerpts from the Battalion War Diary entry for June 12-13) *At 1. 30 a.m. immediately our artillery lifted to the old British trenches, our men, the first and second line under Major K.M. Perry, the third and fourth under Major G.E. McCuaig sprang up on the parapet and set off at a steady pace, over very rough ground and through a heavy barrage and succeeded in gaining the first objective...*

(continued)

As soon as the bombardment of the old British lines lifted at 1.50 a.m. the party again advanced at this stage the going was very heavy...

The attack proceeded briskly, bombing the enemy down the trenches, and directly the final objective was reached, Major McCuaig sent up a red flare...

The affair was to be over by mid-morning, the remainder of the day to be spent in consolidation, in taking care of the wounded of both sides and of prisoners... and in the burial of the dead. The 13th Battalion had retired later that night.

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 until the 13th – had thus culminated with this second and more successful - having been better prepared and also supported by a competent artillery programme - counter-attack by the Canadians on June 13. It was to be the final offensive of the confrontation, a military *quid pro quo* which was to leave both sides in approximately the same positions which they had been occupying on June 2 when the affair had started.



(Right above: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 – and then of 1917 - in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooze, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and of Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)

For the two months which had succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things had reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was to be no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity having been limited to raids and patrols. However, this was not to preclude a lengthy casualty list at times*.

**For example, during the tour in the front lines of July 15 to 19 inclusive, the War Diarist noted fifty-seven killed, wounded and missing in action.*

During the month of August the Canadian battalions had gradually been withdrawn from the *Ypres Salient* and ordered to camps for training in what was termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 13th Battalion had been one of the first to retire, having left the forward area for Brigade Support on August 7, then three days later having moved further to the rear area to begin that period of training.

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, the 13th Battalion had moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer.

The unit had entrained there at seven o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres where it would arrive, some nine hours afterwards, at four o'clock in the afternoon.



From there it had been another eight kilometres – this time on foot – to the awaiting billets.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *Almost a century after the 13th Battalion passed through it on the way to the First Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation.* – photograph from 2015)

For the following four days the personnel of the Battalion had marched to the south-east, to end their trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1. They were to move into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(Right: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?)*)



**La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

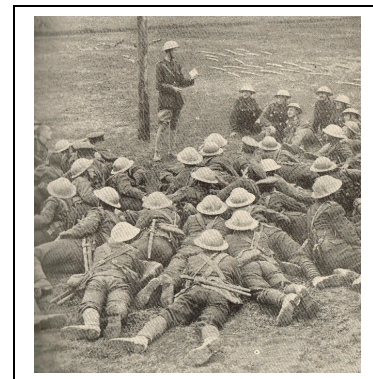
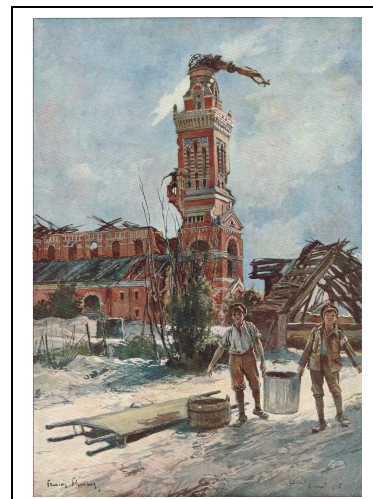
By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which nineteen-thousand dead.

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

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 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 *collective* contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)



(continued)

However, there was to be on September 3, twelve days before that general attack by the British, an assault put in by the 13th Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force at a place known as *Mouquet Farm*. Two Companies of the 13th Battalion (*Canadian Infantry*), Numbers 1 and 2, had been sent forward to assist in this operation at nine o'clock that morning.

The 13th Battalion War Diary for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially thus: *At 2.00p.m. No.3 Company... went forward and at 5.00 p.m. the remainder of the Battalion:-*

Headquarters – Pozieres Wood

Nos 1 and 2 Companies advanced and held the positions 73 to No. 1, 93 to No. 2 and consolidated.

No. 1 Company, Bombing the German Communication, and No. 2 Company, repelling a German Attack...

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



...During the whole of Sunday Night, the men were heavily shelled, but showed great courage and endurance (sic).

Sept 4th. ...The heavy shelling continued the whole of the day, on the Front and Support Lines, the Battalion also suffered a heavy Counter Attack. We managed however to connect up 55 and 59 and make a fair trench...

1916 5th Sept. ...The heavy shelling continued again on both sides, during the whole of the day, our Artillery was very active with guns of all Calibres, and fired over about two shells for every German one...

Maybe not a major affair in the eyes of certain authorities, the action at *Mouquet Farm* on September 3 and 4 was to cost the 13th Battalion a total of three-hundred twenty-three casualties.

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



The 13th Battalion had remained in the forward area until September 7, then had withdrawn to the town of Albert until the 9th when the unit had been ordered on a route-march in stages...to a Rest Area...in proximity to the community of Bonneville.

There at Bonneville for three days, it had then been ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)*. The unit had encamped there on the 18th, three days after the start of the British general offensive of September 15.

(continued)

It was not to be recorded how the officers and *other ranks* had felt about this march to nowhere-in-particular and back, but the War Diarist of that time would make the following entry: *...A halt was called for a short time at Warloy, and another longer halt was called for at a point not far from Senlis. These rests however were not appreciated much as it was too wet to sit down, the men were wet through and very weary, with standing with their heavy packs*, although they sang and whistled throughout the march**. ...The only member of the Battalion that seemed to thoroughly enjoy the hill climbing expedition was the Regimental Goat Pet (the Pipers Goat).*

**Perhaps the officers and troops were wearing the kilts that they had worn until the beginning of September when they had been allowed to wear shorts if they wished; it must be remembered that a single kilt is made from fifteen yards of woollen cloth – heavy when dry: extremely heavy when wet.*

***Apparently they were accompanied on the march not only by the pipers' goat, but by the pipers themselves, the pipe band marching second only to the Headquarters Detachment.*

Only days later again, the 13th Battalion was to endure a further harsh experience of the Somme.

The 13th Battalion had taken over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, having relieved the 2nd Canadian Battalion near to the village of Courcellette. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit had remained there for only two days before having retired into support once more. It was then to be withdrawn into billets in Albert two days later again, on the 27th, and further back to Warloy on the morrow.



(Right above: *Seen from the north, the village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 12017*)

(Right below: *After the fighting of Courcellette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

Warloy, within hours' marching distance of Albert, was where the Battalion was to be stationed for a week; during that time it had been involved in drills, parades, inspections, a bath for everyone in the unit, church, lectures, musketry and the replacement of worn equipment and clothing.

At the end of those seven days it had made the return march once more to Albert and then, on the 6th, had continued on to the camp at *Brickfields*.



(continued)

The Battalion was now to be prepared for the upcoming offensive action to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps – in conjunction with the British 3rd Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the chosen objective for the 13th Battalion was to be a German position designated as *Regina Trench*.

Unfortunately it appears that the appropriate page of the 13th Battalion War Diary a propos this operation, is missing. However, the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War journal offers some information, albeit less detailed, on the day's happenings.

The attack on the German positions had gone in on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8th.

(Right: *Canadian Army Medical Corps personnel at work in a Regimental First Aid Post in the forward area – from Le Miroir*)

The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War Diary:

7.45 a.m. 13th Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.

9.15 a.m. Message... stating 13th Bn. stopped by German wire.

9.25 a.m. 13th Bn. report situation unchanged.

12.19 p.m. Message... ordering 13th Bn. to hold on to original position (jumping off line) and to try connect up in the evening with the left of the 16th Bn.

5.30 p.m. Message from 13th Bn. timed 2.25 pm. gives position of 13th Bn. Those who got into REGINA Trench were bombed towards the 16th Bn. Remainder were held up by barbed wire and were practically wiped out by M.G. fire.

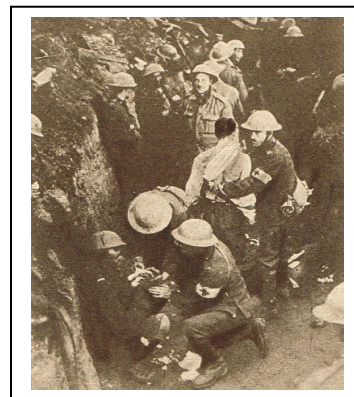
(Right above: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on November 10-11, 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

6.00 p.m. 15th Bn. report at 3.45 p.m. that 13th Bn. called on 3 platoons of the reinforcing company of 15th Bn. and these are being replaced at dusk.

13th Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.

On October 9 the 13th Battalion held on in their former jumping off positions despite... heavy shelling for the greater part of the day... On the night of October 9-10 the entire 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade retired... and the 13th Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.

The Battalion War Diarist would enter the figure of some three-hundred casualties* for the day of October 8 alone.



**On the entries of days following he also notes imprecise numbers of those originally reported as 'missing' who, by then, were reporting to duty with the unit.*

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



On October 11 the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) had begun its march away from the *First Battle of the Somme*. Having passed to the west then north – always on foot - by a circuitous route behind the city of Arras and then beyond, the unit had finally arrived in a sector further north up the line, this in the general area of the city and mining centre of Lens.



(Right above: The city of Arras was to endure four years of shelling during the Great War; the Grand'Place (Grande Place) looked like this by March, 1917, and more destruction was to follow. – from Le Miroir)



More precisely, the 13th Battalion had found itself relieving the 13th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment in the trenches at Cabaret and Souchez. The date was October 27.

(Right above: The village of Souchez already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir)

The following weeks of autumn and the first ones of the winter were to be spent by personnel of the 13th Battalion in the same and also adjacent sectors. There the officers and men had once more settled into an existence in – and out of – the trenches.

And of course, it was on December 9 that Private McLaughlin had taken his place among the unit's ranks.



(Right above: A detachment of Canadian troops going to a forward area during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration)

* * * * *

It was not until December 12, three days later, that the 13th Battalion moved up once more into the forward area to support positions. It was there to remain until the 17th when it advanced into the front line where it relieved the 14th Canadian Battalion.

Private McLaughlin's unit thereupon announced its arrival to the enemy with its trench mortars and its Stokes Guns (heavy mortars).

(continued)

At about three o'clock on that afternoon the Germans showed their appreciation and caused havoc with their artillery in the area of the 13th Battalion's Headquarters. ...*About the same time a large number of minnenwerfers and rifle grenades were fired into our front and support line trenches, causing a few casualties and a considerable amount of material damage* (Excerpt from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for December 17, 1917).

The tour in the front-line area was to be a short one and the 13th Battalion retired from there on December 21 and was then able to look forward to Christmas Day. Apart from special meals there was also: *Reveille 6.45 a.m., Physical Training, 7.10 a.m. to 7.30 a.m., Breakfast 7.30 a.m., 8.45 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. Squad Drill, 9.30 a.m. to 10.00 a.m. Saluting, 10.00 to 11.00 a.m. Bayonet Fighting, 11.00 to 11.30 a.m. Rapid Loading, 1.30 to 2.00 p.m. Squad Drill, 2.30 to 3.00 Gas Helmet Drill, 3.00 to 4.00 p.m. platoon drill. Drill for the Machine Gun Section, bombers and Intelligence section, Signallers and Headquarter details were in charge of the R.S.M. Holy Communion was celebrated at 8.30 a.m. in the Y.M.C.A. hut for all those wishing to attend. Parties attending this parade were paraded by an officer or N.C.O. at the conclusion of same and marched direct to the Battalion Parade grounds where they rejoined their units* (Excerpt from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for December 25, Christmas Day, 1918).

Gone by then, apparently, were the days of Christmas of 1914 when some soldiers had played football with the enemy*.

**However, as Private McLaughlin's unit was a Highland Battalion, New Year's Day – Hogmanay – was celebrated, there being no training and no parades – except for the sick of whom, perhaps not surprisingly, there were few, and those who presented themselves were as often as not, again hardly surprisingly, victims of having drunk too many 'healths' to His Majesty, the King.*

It was not to be until January 25 that the 13th Battalion moved up to the front once more – into the *Calonne Sector* - although it had been shuffled around in the near and far rear areas during the earlier days of that month. Work was more of a defensive nature, building and restoring support positions, as well as supplying carrying-parties to bring wire and munitions to the forward dumps.



(Right above: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917: The use of the head-band to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)

Due to the snow-covered ground, the usually active patrolling by both sides was limited as white camouflage clothing was unavailable; thus it was the gunners and the mortar-men of both sides who were the most belligerent during this period. On January 30 Private Mc Laughlin and his Battalion were relieved.

(continued)

Apparently, however, the locale to which the unit retired was little safer than the forward area: *The position which the Battalion took over in Calonne was rather peculiar owing to the fact that the front line cuts off part of the town. Therefore only certain parts are safe to move around in, owing to the amount of sniping etc., which goes on, in some places the streets are swept with Machine Gun fire at sight...* (Excerpt from 13th Battalion War Diary entry for January 30, 1917)

However, casualties at the time were relatively light, the total for that entire month of January, 1917, amounting to just thirty.

This, then, was to be the routine for the Battalion for the next little while: it was ordered back up into the forward area for a tour lasting from February 5 to 11 inclusive and then back into reserve before being sent into the same front-line area again on February 17. On February 22, after five days there, Private McLaughlin's unit was relieved and was ordered to move back to its former billets in Calonne. However, the first part of this relief could hardly be described as...*relief*:

(Excerpt from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for February 22, 1917) *The Companies...proceeded to Calonne by the overland route, risking the possible chance of stray bullets. As the night was very dark, progress was naturally exceedingly slow. The roads proved to be quite as muddy as communication trenches, and weighed down with full marching order, the men sank to their knees in the mud, one man, as a matter of fact arrived back in billets without any boots, having lost them in an unsuccessful effort to wrench his feet out of the mud...*

And once having arrived at Calonne, the Battalion was still within range of the German artillery.

(Excerpt from the 13th Battalion War Diary entry for February 23, 1917) *The weather throughout the day was practically the same as on the 22nd, dull, misty and damp. The day was spent for the most part in cleaning up equipment, billets, etc., and getting as much of the trench mud off as possible. During the day there was a considerable amount of artillery activity in the vicinity, and one man had the misfortune to be hit in the face by a piece of shrapnel while standing in the door of his billet...*

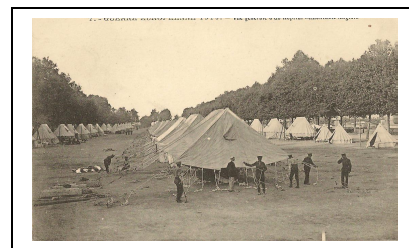
The only casualty recorded by the 13th Battalion War Diarist on that day was to be...(282161) *Pte. W. McLaughlin, Wounded*. Evacuated from the 13th Battalion's positions in Calonne, and after unspecified preliminary care, he was subsequently admitted on the following day, February 24, into the 6th Casualty Clearing Station established in the vicinity of the community of Bruay.



(Right above: *Four-hundred forty-one dead of the Great War lie within the bounds of Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension. The majority is Canadian, but British, French, German, Indian and South African soldiers also have a last resting-place there.* – photograph from 2017)

(continued)

(Right: A *British casualty clearing station* – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



The son of Edward McLaughlin (often elsewhere found as *Laughlin* or *Loughlin*), fisherman, and of Emma Mary McLaughlin (née *Collins*) – married April 16, 1888 - of the Flat Islands, District of Burin, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Gwendeline-Beverley (sic).

He was also, as seen above, husband to Gertrude* (née *McLaughlin*) of Newfoundland, although the two were to make their home in Halifax, Nova Scotia. To her, Private McLaughlin, on August 26, 1916, had willed his all and, on October 1, 1916, had also allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay**.

**There exists confusion in some sources which record Gertrude as his mother and which do not document him as having been married.*

***In 1918 she married again, to George Vincent – father of five children – and moved to the province of Ontario.*

Private McLaughlin was reported by the Commanding Officer of the 6th Casualty Clearing Station as having *died of wounds* on February 24, 1917, the day of his admission*.

Casualty report – “*Died of Wounds*” (*Shrapnel Wound Head Penetrating*) at No. 6 Casualty Clearing Station

**The CWGC (Commonwealth War Graves Commission) in its on-line documentation has erred in recording 1916 as the year of his death. It is correct, however, on his grave-stone.*

William McLaughlin had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-three years: date of birth on the Flat Islands, Newfoundland, June 13, 1892 (from attestation papers).

Private William McLaughlin 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.



