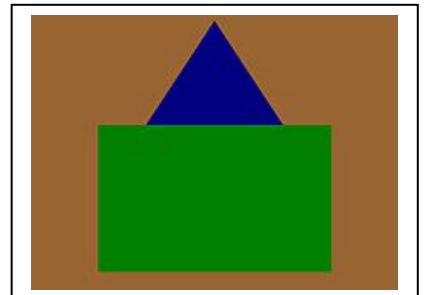




Private William Thomas McLean, Number 877283 of the 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in the Barlin Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference I.F.91.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 73rd Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, William Thomas McLean was already residing in the Cape Breton mining community of North Sydney, on King Street, at the time of his enlistment in that town. By then he was a married man, he and his wife, Sarah, being the parents of three children. The 1911 Census proves that he had been in Nova Scotia at least as early as that year – and likely longer as the first-born was by then aged three - living on Creeta Street in the District of Northern-Victoria – the street seems to have since disappeared and further details are, as yet, unavailable.

Having enlisted on either March 8 or 9, 1916, William Thomas McLean then presented himself for medical examination in North Sydney on March 10 and was found to be *...fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. On the same day he attested and was thereupon *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*).

It was not to be until seven weeks later, on April 27, that the formalities of enlistment were to come to a conclusion; on that day the Commanding Officer of the 185th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day, declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

By this above date, Private McLean would have already spent the intervening seven weeks undergoing initial training in the town, now military camp, of Broughton*, only some twenty kilometres to the south of the industrial city of Sydney. He was to remain there for yet a further twenty-six days.

**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 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).*

Private McLean's posting to Broughton was to come to an end in mid-May: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade which was to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then passed the summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for overseas service.

It was at seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, that the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of Private McLean's 185th Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* – sister ship of *Britannic*, sunk during the following month, and of the ill-starred *Titanic* -in the harbour at Halifax.



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

(continued)

Earlier that same day, the 85th and the 188th Battalions had marched on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd Battalions.

On October 13th - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to file up the gangways before *the ship* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. One of the largest liners afloat at the time, for this trans-Atlantic passage *Olympic* was carrying some six-thousand military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on October 18, five days later – some sources have October 19 - and the troops disembarked on that same day. The 185th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the county of Surrey where it was to remain for the following seventeen months.

Those responsible for the organization of the four Nova Scotia battalions into the Highland Brigade had envisaged the formation serving as such, as a single entity, in *active service* on the *Western Front*. This was not to come to pass as the casualties of 1916 had left every unit that had fought at *the Somme* in a depleted condition. By December of 1916 the Brigade had been dissembled and much of its personnel sent to France to make good those losses.



The 85th Battalion was to be the exception to the rule as it was sent to France in February of 1917. Serving with the 11th and then the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 4th Canadian Division, it was to distinguish itself at first at Vimy Ridge and then also during the remainder of the conflict*.

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

**Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to despatch 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 designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.

Private Mc Lean, however, was to spend but seven weeks less a day in the United Kingdom. Just a single week after having made out a will in which he left his everything to his wife, on December 5 he was *struck off strength* by the 185th Battalion in England to be *taken on strength* on the morrow, December 6, in France by the 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) which was already serving on the Continent.

(continued)

On the night of the 5-6 he had made the crossing of the English Channel; through which ports Private McLean travelled appears not to be recorded among his papers although many troops from *Witley Camp* embarked in Folkestone and landed in Boulogne, some two hours' sailing-time distant. Whichever the case, on December 6 he was reported at the large Canadian Base Depot in the area of the French port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.



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

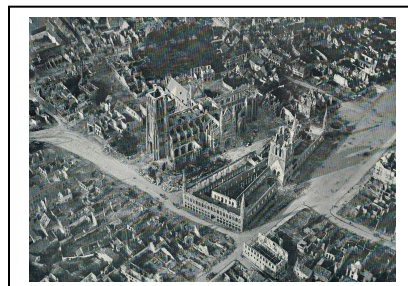
On December 7 a re-enforcement draft was despatched from Le Havre to seek out the parent unit of the 73rd Battalion. Among the draft was Private McLean whose papers document him to have reported *to duty* on the following day again. The 73rd Battalion War Diary records the occasion as being on December 9: *A draft of 150 other ranks received from 185th Highland Battalion from Nova Scotia. Men were all of good physique, intelligent and had a smart appearance...*

At the time the Battalion was billeted some eight kilometres to the south-west of the larger centre of Béthune, in the community of Ruitz, there to rest, to reorganize and to re-enforce. Only a single week previously it had been... *the last Battalion in the last Brigade of Canadians to leave the SOMME* (Excerpt from the 73rd Battalion War Diary).

* * * * *

The 73rd Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4th Canadian Division. The Division had been transferred from England to the Continent in August of 1916, arriving, as Private Johnson was to do, at Le Havre. The 73rd Battalion had spent two days at the Canadian Infantry Base Depot there before travelling northward on two trains.

Having passed through the larger French centres of Arras and Amiens, Boulogne and Saint-Omer, the unit had de-trained on Belgian soil in the town of Poperinghe. There the 73rd Battalion had arrived in the rear area of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*, and where the by-now veteran 1st Canadian Division was to play a role in the formation of the new-comers.



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

The 73rd Battalion had subsequently – and briefly – undergone the daily routines and rigours of life in the trenches of the *Western Front*. After a final tour in the forward area, it had been relieved on September 23rd and the unit's short experience of the *Ypres Salient* had thus drawn to a close. The Battalion casualties for the month had been three killed and twenty-three wounded – extremely light for *the Salient*.

The troops which had arrived to take the place of the Canadians on that final day had been Irish; they had only recently been withdrawn from the battle-fields of *the Somme* where they had, for the previous two months, been fighting, in the first battle to be designated by that name.

After several days of moving and changing billets hither and thither, the 73rd Battalion had spent a week at Hellebroucq in training for upcoming operations in the cauldron from which its newly-made Irish acquaintances had just retired.

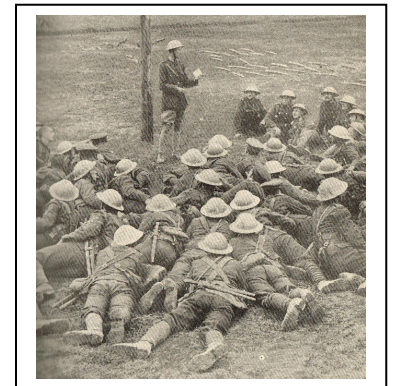
On October 3 the Battalion marched to nearby Arques where it entrained. On the following day it arrived in the rear area of *the Somme*, at Candas, from where it marched in pouring rain to Beauval where billets had been prepared to receive it. On succeeding days the unit marched again: to Bonneville, to Toutencourt, to Warloy-Baillon where it underwent a period of training, then on the 13th through the provincial town of Albert to the camp at *Tara Hill* where it... *Bivouaced* (sic) *in a muddy field* (*War Diary*)... and provided various working parties for the next dozen or so days.



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

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

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions 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.



(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, in September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)

As the battle had progressed, other troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were been brought in; at first the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution had been in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.



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

The 73rd Battalion had arrived in the area of *the Somme* at a later stage of the offensive than had many other Canadian units; indeed, by the middle of October, many of those first on the scene were being withdrawn, in several cases necessitated by the high incidence of casualties.

On October 26, the 73rd Battalion, by now ready to fill the void, moved forward to an area between the once-villages – now mounds of debris - of Pozières and Contalmaison.

(Right above and right: *The remnants of Pozières just after the conflict, with the Australian Memorial in the gloom* - and also as it is almost a century later – from a vintage post-card and from 2016)



There it had remained in Brigade Reserve until October 30 when the unit had moved forward once more. This was to prove to be a short tour which had terminated on the night of November 2-3; there had been no infantry action to report, although the enemy artillery had apparently been active at times.

Casualties for that period had been eight killed, forty-three wounded with twenty-six others evacuated to hospital for divers reasons.

(Right: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts* – from *Le Miroir*)



During the following week while behind the lines... *Special training carried on in conjunction with the rest of the Brigade, in practising for a general attack with the whole Brigade involved, 72nd and 73rd to lead in this attack...*

On the late evening of November 11 the... *Regiment proceeded into the trenches...*

In fact, according to the Battalion War Diary, the attack by the Canadians was not to be delivered as planned. Instead, the various units were ordered to dig new trenches and to consolidate older positions in expectation of an enemy counter-attack, a fear re-enforced by information elicited from German prisoners.



It would appear that neither side moved, and that the Canadians spent two days preparing for something that never came about. Maybe the extremely heavy artillery-fire delivered by both sides had influenced the decision not to attack.

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

On the night of November 13-14, the 73rd Battalion was withdrawn, its place to be thereupon taken in the line by the 47th Battalion. The numbers of casualties incurred during this two-day period had been, all told, fourteen *killed in action* and thirty-eight more *wounded*, the greater number due to the German guns.

Two more weeks were to pass before the 73rd Battalion had left behind it the *First Battle of the Somme* and, by that time, having added at least a further sixty to the unit's casualty figures. The withdrawal itself had been made on foot, it having commenced on November 29 with the unit marching to the west before turning northwards to pass behind the battered city of Arras.



(Right above: *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*)

The trek continued beyond Arras, to Ruitz, which was arrived at on December 5. There the Battalion was to remain for the next seventeen days, in billets which were reportedly – at least at the outset – *...in poor condition*.



This then, was when and where Private Johnston reported *to duty*.

(Right above: *A detachment from a Canadian-Scottish regiment, proceeded by its pipe band, marches toward the front. – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

It was not to be until Christmas Eve that Private McLean likely received his first taste of life in the front-line trenches* – or in the support trenches a few hundred metres to the rear - as it was on that day that the 73rd relieved the 46th Canadian Battalion in the area of Souchez.



(Right: *The village of Souchez even before the arrival of the Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)

**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, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*

(continued)

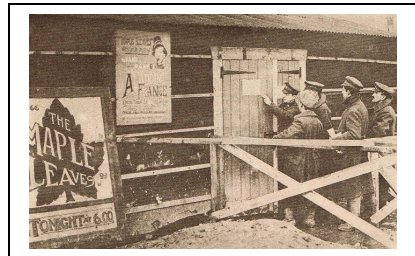
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(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)



The occasions spent in reserve were opportunities for training, lectures, inspections by the upper echelons – usually the further away from the front, the more important the visitor – route marches, sports, with perhaps the odd concert or other entertainment coming to support the troops.

(Right: Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir)



In the forward areas life was both hard and monotonous, if also inevitably at times dangerous: there were parties of the construction, wiring and carrying variety. Patrolling and raids on a local scale were often the norm, as were rat-catching and lice hunts. Most casualties were caused by enemy artillery - and occasionally one's own – although snipers were also a constant peril. But it was sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, more particularly, dental problems were to keep the medical services busy during that period.

During that winter of 1917, there was little concerted infantry activity undertaken by either side; nevertheless, in the case of the 73rd Battalion, a major enemy raid was repulsed on January 7th, and the unit undertook a costly large-scale operation of its own on March 1.

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



Excerpt from the 73rd Battalion War Diary entry for March 1, 1917: At five minutes past midnight...code message was received from the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade to the effect that the Gas Attack and consequent Infantry Attack, which had been postponed for several days, would take place that morning.

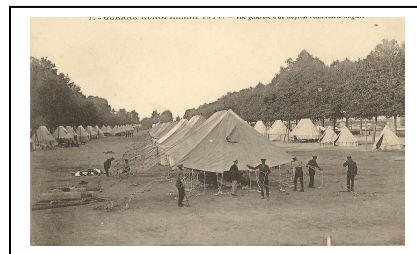
Excerpt from the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for March 1, 1917: A Gas Raid was carried out by 15 Officers and 300 Other Ranks of 72nd Canadian Bn. and 18 Officers and 460 Other Ranks of the 73rd Canadian Bn. with the co-operation of the 10th and 11th Cd. Inf. Bdes. A large enemy bomb dump was blown up and part of his F.L.T. (front-line trench) systematically destroyed. Several Machine Guns were destroyed and approximately 22 dugouts were bombed or treated with mobile charges. A large number of the enemy were killed.

The 73rd Battalion War Diary recorded the unit's casualties as – all ranks - twenty-seven *killed in action* or *died of wounds*, one-hundred three *wounded* and thirty-one *missing in action*. More were later to *die of wounds*.

Casualty Report a propos Private McLean: *Was seriously wounded during a raid on the enemy lines at Vimy Ridge on March 1st, 1917, and succumbed three days later at No. 6 Casualty Clearing Station*.*

**Other reports have him wounded on March 3; the Battalion War Diary of that day reported a single other rank killed and another wounded by friendly fire. In either case he was taken to the 6th CCS at Bruay.*

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



The son of John McLean, fisherman, and of Elizabeth McLean (née *Murphy*) of Grand River, Codroy, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Agnes, Ann, Bridget-Ellen, to John and to Joseph.

He was, of course, also husband to Sarah – to whom he had willed his all and to whom he had allocated as of October 1, 1916, a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay.

The couple were parents to a son and two daughters: Alex aged 8, May aged 6 and Agnes aged 2 – these ages recorded on August 12, 1916. The family lived in North Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

Private McLean was reported as having *died of wounds* on March 4, 1917, by the Commanding Officer of the 6th Casualty Clearing Station at Bruay.

William Thomas McLean had enlisted at the *apparent* age of thirty-nine years: date of birth at Grand River, Codroy, Newfoundland – although this does not appear in St. Anne's parish records as do the birth-dates of his siblings – March 24, 1877*.

**Confirmation would be appreciated.*

Private William Thomas McLean 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.