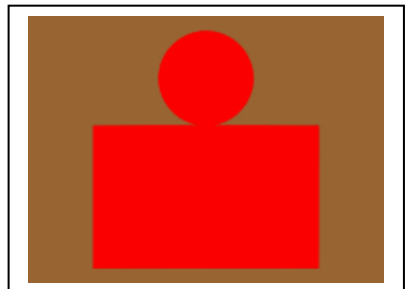




Private Daniel (he apparently used *Dan*) McNeil, Number 2355870, of the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Upton Wood Cemetery, Hendecourt-Les-Cagnicourt: Grave reference C.23.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 5th Battalion (Western Cavalry*) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

**Despite this designation, the unit was authorized in 1914 as a battalion of Canadian Infantry.*



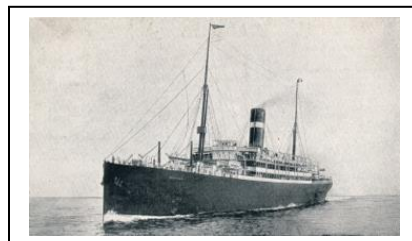
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a millwright*, Daniel McNeil leave behind him a confusion of dates a propos his enlistment. At that time he is recorded as living at 1638, Woodward Avenue, in the American city of Detroit. There may have been a Canadian Army recruiting office there as one of his papers – his original Medical History Sheet - record him as enlisting there on December 14, 1917, before crossing the border on December 18, on his way to London, Ontario – this latter date on an American document.

**Where he learned the skills of a millwright is not clear, but Ancestry.ca records two crossings by a Daniel McNeill in 1915-1916 from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on his way to seek work as a labourer in industrial Cape Breton.*

Canadian records, however, show that on December 15 Daniel McNeil presented himself for medical examination and for attestation in London. On that date he was attached to the 1st Depot Battalion of the Western Ontario Regiment whose commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Milligan, brought the formalities of enlistment to a conclusion when he 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.*

Since the task of the Depot Battalions was to instil only a minimum of training and discipline in its incoming recruits before despatching them to the Canadian Reserve Battalions in the United Kingdom to complete the job, it is not surprising that Private Fitzgerald was to spend only some six weeks in uniform in Canada before being ordered overseas, having submitted to a second medical on January 11, which categorized him as 'A'. He left for the United Kingdom on January 27.

Private McNeil was a soldier of the 2nd Reinforcement Draft of the 1st Depot Battalion (*Western Ontario Regiment*) which sailed from Halifax on that date on board His Majesty's Transport *Scotian*. There were undoubtedly other units taking passage on the ship, but the records at this stage are incomplete, not even the English port of entry is entered, although it was likely Liverpool.



(Right above: *Scotian* was also one of the troop transports to ferry the first Canadian contingent overseas in October of 1914. The photograph of the vessel is from the Bing.com/images web-site.)

Private McNeil's Draft disembarked in the United Kingdom on February 6, 1918, and was transported to the large Canadian military complex which by that time had been established in the county of Hampshire in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – the latter lending its name to the camp. At the same time the entire draft was absorbed by the 4th Canadian Reserve Battalion (*Western Ontario*) with which Private McNeil was to undertake the completion of his training.



(Right above: *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 have been that Private McNeil had family or an acquaintance in or near to Edinburgh as his pay records show him being deducted eight dollars and forty-five cents for a railway ticket dated March 6, 1918, from there to Bramshott. No further details are to be found.

It was to be just over two months later that Private McNeil was transferred once more: on this occasion, on paper, it was to the 47th Battalion (British Columbia) which was already serving on the Continent with the Canadian 4th Division; he was also transferred by ship on the night of April 13-14 from England to France, to report to the 4th Canadian Infantry Base Depot* at Étaples on that latter date.

**This may not be correct as the Base Depots were in the throes of re-organization at the time. Even if it is correct, the records do not show any re-enforcements arriving on that days – or the day before or after.*

Private McNeil's own files show him as being forwarded from there a week later, on April 21 - on this occasion the Base records document an exodus of six-hundred three other ranks on that day. He was to report to the nearby Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp to await a propitious moment to join his new unit; that moment was to be a long time coming.

His pay records all the while that he was at the Reinforcement Camp, appear to record the following: on May 3 he was attached to the CC School – but whether CC denotes simply Canadian Corps or otherwise is not clear – and returned from there on May 23. During this period he had apparently run afoul of the authorities as, on May 21, he was awarded seven days of Field Punishment Number 1 for...*conduct to the prejudice of Good Order & Military Discipline – Gambling (playing Crown & Anchor on a Public thoroughfare)*

It may be that it was on June 22, while still at the CCRC that, without ever physically serving with the 47th Battalion, he was transferred* to the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*) of the North Saskatchewan Regiment.

**The pay records suggest that it was on this day the responsibility for his remuneration was handed to the 5th Battalion. His own records cite August 14 as being the date on which it occurred.*

It also seems likely that Private McNeil remained at the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp until mid-August before being despatched to report to the 5th Battalion. From the month of May up until that time there had been little infantry activity to necessitate any further re-enforcement of Canadian units. However, when he joined his unit on August 15, things had by then changed.

A week before, on August 8, the Canadian Corps, in co-operation with Australian, New Zealand, French and British units, had launched the offensive – there were to be others – which would not conclude until eleven o'clock on the morning of November 11, some four months hence.

* * * * *

(continued)

Private McNeil's new unit, the 5th Battalion (*Western Cavalry*), was an element of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade which was itself a component of the Canadian Division (later 1st Canadian Division). The 5th Battalion had crossed the Atlantic in the convoy which had left the Gaspé in early October carrying the Canadian Division for service in the United Kingdom before it had then crossed the Channel to France in mid-February of 1915.

In April of 1915 it had fought at the *Second Battle of Ypres*, the struggle for the city of that name which had begun on the 22nd of that month with the yellow-green cloud of chlorine gas, its first use in war-time. There the name *Gravenstafel* had become one of the 5th Battalion's first battle honours.

(Right: *The Memorial to the 1st Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads. It was in this area that the Canadian Division withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – to the north-east of Ypres (today Ieper) during the latter days of April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)



(Right: *An artist's impression of Ypres in the summer of 1915. By the end of the war there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

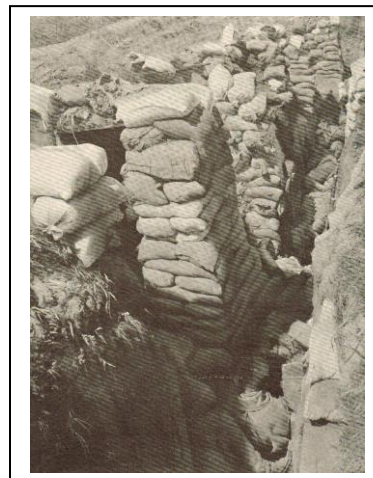


Following that engagement the Battalion had then retired to the west bank of the Yser Canal which runs through Ypres before turning northwards, and then to the northern French community of Outersteene, there to rest, to re-organize and to re-enforce. All too soon, of course, it was to be fighting once more.

Its next confrontation was to be in the vicinity of the French communities of Festubert and Givenchy. On this occasion it was the British – and thus the attached Commonwealth forces – who did the attacking. For little or no gain, a further two-thousand Canadian lives alone were to be sacrificed there.

(Right: *The Labyrinth – French-held trenches just south of the area of Festubert in the summer of 1915 after an attack, as witnessed by the corpse in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)

There followed nine months spent in the *Ploegsteert Sector* just on the Belgian side of the frontier with France. During that time the 2nd Canadian Division – in September of that year – and then the 3rd Canadian Division – as of New-Year's Day of 1916 – had joined the 1st Canadian Division in the field.



The fight for *Mount Sorrel* in June of 1916 had been the next major confrontation between the Canadians and the German Army. The enemy had attacked a sector of the *Ypres Salient* which was at the time the responsibility of the 3rd Canadian Division.

But the situation had deteriorated so rapidly and to such a degree that units from the adjacent 1st Canadian Division – and even from the 2nd Canadian Division serving farther afield – had been called for support.

After eleven days of sometimes horrific fighting, the opposing armies had ended back much where they had started. Little had changed, except that the cemeteries on both sides were that much fuller.

The 5th Battalion had then been withdrawn in mid-August for days of training in north-west France. They would be followed in their turn by units of the other Canadian divisions – by August of 1916 this was to include the newly-arrived 4th Division – whose places in Belgium were to be taken by troops, mostly from the British Isles, who were being withdrawn from the *First Battle of the Somme*.



(Right above: *Vestiges of Canadian trenches of 1915-1916 – some admittedly restored – at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The 5th Battalion had been in training as of August 15 before then being transported by train to the rear area of *the Somme* on August 28. It had then marched for the next five days towards the sound of the guns, to end at the military camp of Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the town of Albert – and within artillery range of the battlefields.

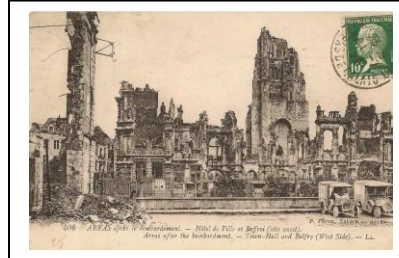
Whereas many of the now-arriving Canadian units were to fight their first major engagement of *the Somme* during the British-led offensive of September 15-17 – and some had been involved even before that – the 5th Battalion was to wait until September 26 and 27 before *going over the top*. Up until that time, even though it had moved into the forward area and the front lines during the intervening period, its losses, by comparison with other battalions, had been light: fifteen *killed in action* and ninety *wounded*.

All that changed on those two days in late September: fifty-six *killed*, three-hundred three *wounded* and one-hundred twenty-two *missing in action*. Some of these latter would have lost their way on the battlefield to later return; others would report to duty after treatment in a medical facility; and some would never be found, after some six months to be officially *presumed dead*.



(Right above: *Canadian wounded being bandaged on the field before being evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir*)

The 5th Battalion was not to play any further such role at *the Somme* although it remained in service there, again at times in the front line, for another three weeks.



On October 17, even as new Canadian units of the 4th Canadian Division were arriving at the front, the 5th Battalion was beginning to retire from the area. It at first marched in a westerly direction, then to turn north so as to pass behind – to the west – of the battered city of Arras and beyond.

(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*)

On October 23, only six days after marching out of Albert, the Battalion arrived at its destination, Bajus, a commune some thirty kilometres to the north-west of the previously-cited city of Arras. It was in an area whose sectors were to now become the responsibility of the Canadian Corps for much of the remainder of the *Great War*, a region which extended from Béthune in the north to Arras in the south.



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

The winter of 1916-1917 was one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches*. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.

**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 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration*)

(continued)

For the first twenty-four days of the month of January the 5th Battalion was stationed behind the lines in camps at Houdain and Bully-Grenay. There its personnel indulged in such things as lectures, classes, training and inspections; there was also instruction in bombing, wiring and the use of machine-guns; moreover, during that period everyone was treated to a bath.

Towards the end of the month there was time spent in the trenches, a six-day tour. But it was very quiet, the rare war-like activities reported were enemy artillery-fire, and the Canadian response of rifle-grenades. The casualty count for the tour reflects the relative calm: *four wounded*.

All of February and the first nine days of March were likewise spent in the same forward areas; the number of casualties was similarly low; four *killed* and fifteen *wounded*, many of the latter only slightly; one of the fatalities was also to be classified as an accident and another as self-inflicted.

On or about March 10 the unit retired to the area of Écoivres-St-Éloi, there to provide working-parties for various tasks as directed from above, but also to be instructed in the use of enemy weaponry, particularly his machine-guns.



(Right above and right: *The village of St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partially destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)

(Right below: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America. – from Le Miroir*)



There followed a further nine days in the trenches, just as non-belligerent as before, before a return to training at Écoivres. The work assigned to the Battalion appears at this point to have increased in its intensity – at least the War Diarist seems to have thought so – much of it not just the manipulating of stores and munitions, but also the excavation of trenches and tunnels. And by now word was making the rounds of an upcoming attack.



On April 8... *In the evening 'A' and 'B' Companies special carrying party, 27 O.Rs. strong, stretcher-bearing party, 57 O.Rs. strong...and remainder of H.Q. details arrived in the trenches. A hot meal was given to all, and they then proceeded to get into the assembly positions. (Excerpt from War Diary entry of April 8)*

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army 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 daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.



(Preceding page: *the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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 – with some British units under Canadian command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

The Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions had been handed responsibility for the Ridge itself; to their immediate right had been the Canadian 2nd Division, attacking in the area of the village of Thélus on the southern slope; and to the right again the Canadian 1st Division – of which the 5th Battalion was a component - had been ordered to clear the area lower down the slope again towards the village of Roclincourt.



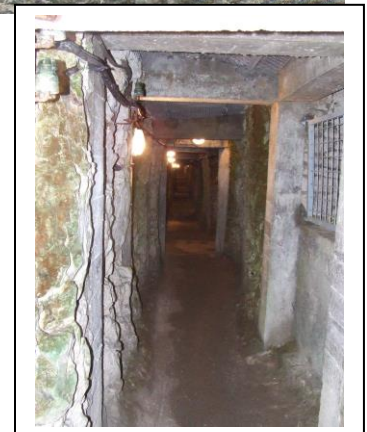
(Right above: *The monument to the Canadian 1st Division which stands just outside the village of Thélus* – photograph from 2017)

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

On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks. There had on that day been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



Having moved up from tunnels and dug-outs, the 5th Battalion was in position in its assembly trenches by one o'clock in the morning of April 9. Four hours and thirty minutes later the creeping barrage opened and the attacking forces left their trenches and advanced towards the enemy positions. Forty minutes later the Battalion's first objective – the so-called Black Line - was taken.

The advance continued and by nine o'clock that morning the Red Line had been reached and occupied. There the Battalion remained until six in the evening at which time it was relieved and retired to the Black Line, there to consolidate.

The War Diarist estimated the number of casualties by that time as having been fourteen officers and three-hundred fifty *other ranks*.



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

Three days later the Battalion was still reportedly in the Black Line. The momentum of the first day had not been followed up on the days following: orders had been to consolidate any gains in the expectation of German counter-attacks; not only that, the ground had been transformed into a morass such that it was proving more than difficult to move guns, munitions and material through the forward areas.

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



Thus the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not 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.

During the *Battle of Arras*, the success at Vimy Ridge had been almost the sole exception to the rule*, the rule being costly engagements more often than not accomplishing little or nothing. At Arleux-en-Gohelle on April 28 some ground was gained by the Canadian attackers but at great sacrifice. The confrontation at Fresnoy was otherwise; the losses there were also extensive – and the Germans retained the village.

**This was so not only for the Canadians. The British and Australians experienced bloody reverses, not to forget the Newfoundland Regiment and its four-hundred eight-seven casualties on April 14 at Monchy-le-Preux.*

(Right: *These are some of the outskirts of the city of Lens; the caption reads simply: A sector held by the Canadians – from Le Miroir*)



The remainder of the month of June and then all of July comprised once again the rotations of the troops into the front, support and reserve positions. It was to be the month of August before a further concerted effort was demanded of the Canadian Corps, and it was also to be in the same general area, albeit a little to the north of Vimy, in the outskirts of the mining-centre and city of Lens.

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



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

(Right above: *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*)

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire 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.

Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.

(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*)



Objectives were 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 was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

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

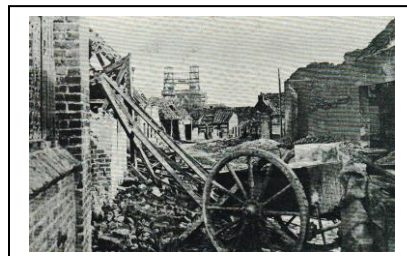
(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from Le Miroir*)



It was to the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions that had been allotted the responsibility of the capture of *Hill 70*, and the 5th Battalion was to play its role. By August 13 the 1st Canadian Division was in place in front of the village of Loos.

(Right below: *The remnants of the village of Loos (see below) as it was already in early 1915* The pit-head(s?) known as Tower Bridge stand in the background. – from Le Miroir*)

The following day's entry of the 5th Battalion War Diary reads partially thus: *After dark the battalion moved out in front to the Front Line, digging themselves in ready for the attack...*



Then, on August 15... *Sharp at 4.25 a.m., the barrage opened up and the attack was launched. Two minutes afterwards, the men began to advance, and the German Front Line was taken with very little enemy opposition and very few casualties...*

...‘C’ and ‘D’ companies having taken their objectives, dug-in about 40 yards past the old German Front Line, which was afterwards heavily shelled by the enemy. ‘A’ and ‘B’ companies, following up the barrage had a large number of casualties from Machine Gun Fire before reaching (sic) their objective...

The casualties sustained in capturing this line were about 125 men.

Shortly after the Line had been taken, and the work of consolidation started, the enemy commenced shelling it, and from then on, gave the Line no peace. (Excerpts from the Report of Operation of August 14th – 18th 1917, as contained in the Battalion War Diary)

It was the night of August 16 before the 5th Battalion was relieved to fall back behind the new Canadian positions; but it was a further twenty-four hours before the unit was further withdrawn, on this occasion to fall back from the field entirely, to the rear at Les Brébis.



By this time the casualty count had increased: to thirteen officers and three-hundred fifty-two *other ranks*.

(Right above: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from Le Miroir*)

This Canadian-led campaign had apparently been scheduled to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good its by-then exorbitant losses.

The Australians and New Zealanders – stationed further to the south than the Canadians - and then the Canadians themselves, were to be ordered to prepare to move north; thus the Canadian Corps was obliged to abandon its plans. There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the Lens-Béthune sectors and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area.

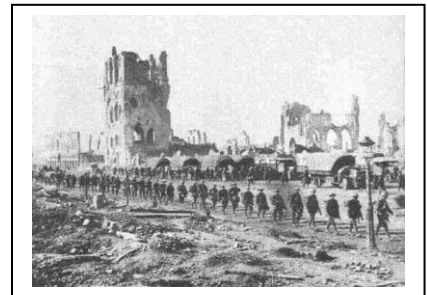
On most days, according to the Battalion War Diary, it was the artillery which fought it out – but, of course, the infantry was usually the target.

(Right: *Canadian artillery troops manhandling a gun into position 'somewhere in Flanders' during Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)



Even though it was known that the Canadians were to be transferred north into Belgium, for the 5th Battalion there was to be a nine-week interlude between the action at *Hill 70* and the transfer to its next theatre of operations. During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches was still the rule - with several exceptions when the unit was retired to areas behind the lines, particularly for training, although it was also apparent from the Battalion War Diary entries that sports were being considered more and more to be a morale booster among the troops.

On October 19 of 1917 the Canadians of the 5th Battalion were ordered north into Belgium and once more to the *Ypres Salient* which the unit had left some fourteen months before. Officially designated to be the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the last day of that July – was to come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – at least was later ostensibly professed to have been - one of the British Army's main objectives.



(Right above: *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: *Somewhere, possibly anywhere or almost everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)



From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was true with the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)



(continued)

On October 19 the 5th Battalion had begun to make its way on foot north from Houdain to the area of Thiennes where it arrived two days later. On the following day it was on its way again, a five-hour march to its destination, Ferme Creve Court (*the spelling is that of the War Diarist*), where it was to remain until November 4.

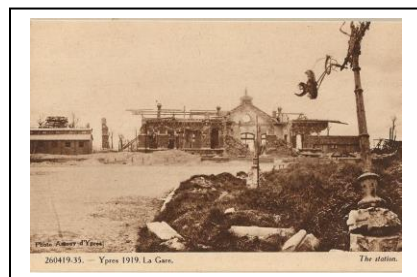
On that day the Battalion entrained at Ebblinghem station at six in the morning to cross the Franco-Belgian frontier before de-training at Brandhoek four hours later. From there it was a half-hour march before *Red Rose Camp* was reached, a mixture... of huts, tents and wrecked houses... which was to be the unit's home for the next three days.



(Right above: *Canadian troops – not having proper bathing facilities - performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

(Right: *The remnants of the railway station just outside the ramparts of Ypres where the Battalion detrained – the image is from 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

On October 7 the 5th Battalion returned to the railway station at Brandhoek for the short train journey to Ypres. The station at Ypres is outside the walls so the unit would have passed through the Lille Gate to find its new quarters in the shattered city's cellars and dugouts.



The stay was of only a single day's duration. On October 8 the 5th Battalion crossed the city in a north-easterly direction to the community of St-Jean (*Sint-Jan*) in the outskirts. An attack by enemy aeroplanes on the following morning, October 9, having been beaten off by the fire of several machine-guns, in the afternoon the unit made its way towards the front, to Brigade Support, Meetcheele(?) in the vicinity of the Bevedere Spur.

Although in support, during the following days the Battalion – its four Companies to act independently wherever and whenever necessary – was heavily involved in concert with the 7th and 8th Battalions who were to deliver an attack on the morning of October 10. The 5th Battalion had already been the target on enemy guns during the night of October 9, and had thus suffered a goodly number of casualties.

(Right: *In Tyne Cot Cemetery, graves surround a German strong-point protecting the approaches to the village of Passchendaele. – photograph from 2010*)



The losses were to continue on the day of the attack by the 7th and 8th Battalions, it would seem to have been mostly due to the German guns: 'B' Company was reportedly down to thirty men; 'C' Company could muster only forty.

(continued)

(Right below: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument – this is the ground up which the Canadians fought during those weeks of October and November of 1917. – photograph from 2010*)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist appears to have voiced no opinion as to the success or otherwise of the action. If it were a victory of sorts, then it would appear to have been a pyrrhic one as the 5th Battalion – *in support* – had incurred some three-hundred twenty casualties* during those days. It was relieved by the 58th Battalion at ten o'clock in the late evening of November 11.



**The Canadian 8th Battalion was to retire from the field about two-hundred twenty strong – less than company strength.*

Having retired to the camp at St-Jean early on November 12, the Battalion was back at *Red Rose Camp*, Brandhoek, later that same day. There it remained for three days before being bussed south-west across the border into France on November 15 and to the vicinity of the community of Merville. From there it marched southwards in stages until, one week later, on November 22, it was reported as having been posted into the forward trenches at Lievin, a westerly suburb of Lens.

The Battalion once again reverted to the grind of everyday life in the front, support and reserve areas – perhaps very welcome after *Passchendaele*.

Although the officer responsible for the War Diary appears to have neglected to enter it in his journal, the month of December offered something a little different to all the Canadian formations which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least *some* units, was in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to help pay for it as well.*

The winter of 1917-1918 was to pass very much in the manner as had the previous winters of the Great War: in stagnation. Any infantry activity tended to be local: ever-present patrols and the occasional raid – still an activity much in favour with the British High Command. The days, for the most part, were reported as... *quiet* – the exceptions to the rule being described as... *very quiet*.

And most casualties were, as usual during these so-called *quieter* periods, as ever due to the enemy's artillery-fire and to his snipers.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers standing in front of a temporary theatre peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)



While the winter of 1917-1918 was again quiet – as had been the previous winters of the Great War – it was also a time when the opposing forces were gathering strength and making preparations for the months ahead. It was on the first day of spring that the German plans were put into operation.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory early in the year of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, they delivered a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', launched 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 below: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus 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 the 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 Flanders, 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*)



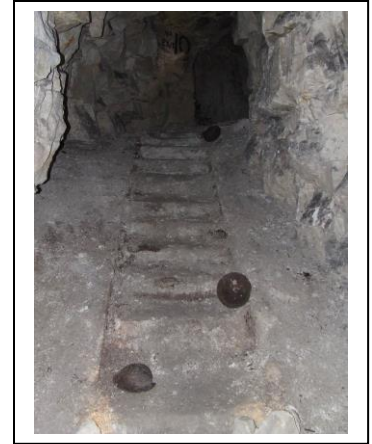
As was the case with a great number of the Canadian units, it appears to have been several days before even the news of the German offensive filtered through let alone there being any sense of great urgency. In the case of the 5th Battalion it was not until the 25th of the month that the War Diary entry for the day makes mention of it: *Battalion was ordered to "Stand To" and be ready to move at 6 a.m. tomorrow. A hostile attack is expected in the morning.*

On the morrow the... *Battalion "Stood To" during the day ready to move off at 1 hour's notice.* But the anticipated attack did not materialize and orders were received to be at Écoivres the following morning. Two days were thereupon spent frantically driving and marching around the country side in the rain, ordered and counter-ordered, losing men and equipment, until, on March 29, the 5th Battalion found itself billeted in the community of Berneville.

(continued)

A succession of postings followed, all apparently still in expectation of a further German offensive – the one in Flanders was launched as late as April 9: the Battalion moved to Arras (Ronville Caves), then to St-Nicholas, back to Arras, thence to the front line and Bois de la Mason Blanche.

(Right: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system - hewn in the rock under much of Arras - almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. It was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions.* – photograph from 2012(?))



(Excerpt from the 5th Battalion War Diary entry for April 21, 1918): *Enemy artillery fire was fairly active on area immediately in rear of Battalion, apparently ranging on ROCLINCOURT-BLANGY Road...and...on Railway Bridge over ST. LAURENT-FAMPOUX Road. Spasmodic shelling of dead ground...where our Field Hows. (howitzers) are located... Casualties. 1 O.R. wounded.*

But the services of the 5th Battalion were not to be required to staunch the German flood on either of the two fronts, nor would those of any other Canadian unit. The enemy was held: now it was to be the turn of the Allies.

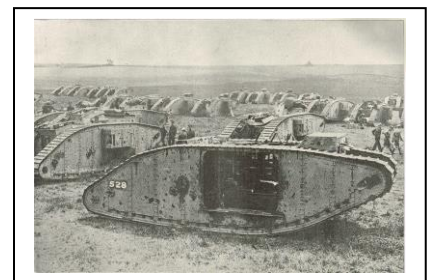
After the German offensives of March and April a relative calm had descended on the Western Front as the German threat faded; the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but there had been nothing of any military significance lost to the Allies on either of the two fronts: in the south the Allies retained the railway network at Amiens; in the north, none of the Channel ports had been threatened.

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 Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Ferdinand Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive.

Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right: *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'. Many of the troops to be involved in the fighting from this time onwards underwent training in the company of tanks.* – from Illustration)

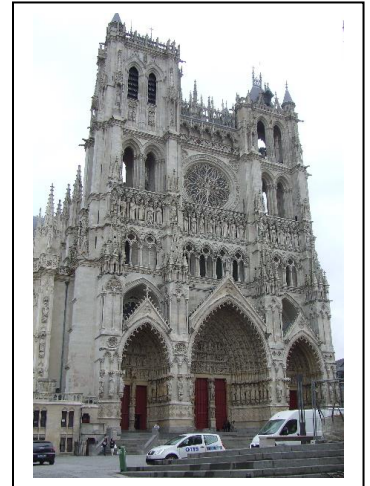


(continued)

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

It had been on the night of August 1-2 that the 5th battalion had begun its transfer from the Arras sector to the theatre to the east of Amiens. Relieved of the evening of August 1, the first stage had ended at four in the morning of the next day in huts on the main Arras to St-Pol Road.

Apparently the troops were in good spirits having conducted a successful raid on July 26, and were excited at the prospect of...*something big* – even though nothing was known about it at that stage*.



****The 5th Battalion had not been the only Canadian unit on the move at this time. Within a matter of days, at the end of July and beginning of August of 1918, it had been the entire Canadian Corps which had been transferred from the sectors north of and around Arras to face the Germans on the front which they had established at the time of their offensive four months earlier.***

The majority of the Canadian forces had passed behind the city of Amiens before turning eastward, marching during the hours of darkness, to ensure surprise. This it had succeeded in doing, as the events of the few following days were to prove.

August 3 had been a busy – and popular - day: *Pay parades – baths – Clothing parades...* then a four-hour march followed by a train-ride to an unknown destination. It was to be a twelve-hour, overnight, journey which terminated at eight o'clock the following morning in the community of Senarpont*. From now on the Canadians of the 5th Battalion would be continuing to their destination on foot.

****That day, August 4, marked the fourth anniversary of the declaration of war.***

The overnight marches went on for three more days until, at six o'clock on the morning of August 7, the destination of the 5th Battalion, le Bois de Gentelles (*Gentelles Wood*) was reached. There...*in a system of trenches on the outskirts of the wood...a well-earned rest was indulged in.*

At 9.30 p.m. the Battalion moved off to take up the assembly positions, which had been previously reconnoitred during the day by their Officers. (Excerpt from 5th Battalion War Diary entry of August 7, 1918)

The 5th Battalion War Diarist then continues with a narrative of the next morning: *A peculiar and unmistakeable atmosphere of success pervaded all ranks. This was remarked upon by many. Everything was quiet and it was evident that the enemy had no inkling of the presence of storming troops. Whirring and humming Motors of the tanks could be heard drawing nearer and nearer, and the men were warned to lookout (sic), for where they would cross the trench.*

One of our planes roared across to the enemy lines, the rum ration was issued, officers warned the men to fix bayonets in readiness to go over, an occasional enemy Very light (sic) soared into the sky, our plane came tearing back, then “CRASH”, like one gun, the ear-splitting, devastating barrage opened, and fell on the enemy’s lines. It must have sounded to him like the “crack of doom”.

Up and over went the Battalion, tense and eager, well in hand, confident, one might say joyous, that feeling of assured success became intensified. There was a heavy ground mist which made it impossible to see 25 yards ahead, but in spite of this, well led, the men went ahead unhesitatingly, and it was necessary to restrain them, so keen were they...



(Right above: A group of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background – from Le Miroir)

Thus the first minutes of the attack of August 8: The confidence that the writer had seen in the faces of his men had not been misplaced; it seemed that most things would go well on that day – and the next. Whereas in past campaigns the gains, if any, had been measured in yards, those of this battle were being counted in kilometres.

The casualties, however, were not light – and they were to become heavier – and in some cases they were not incomparable to those incurred during 2nd Ypres, the Somme, Arras, and Passchendaele: the 5th Battalion were to count some three-hundred six, *all ranks*, on those first two days alone.

The community of Warvillers had been taken on August 9, the second day of the fighting. There the Battalion was to remain as it was now the turn of units of the 4th Canadian Division to leap-frog through and to continue the drive. The 5th Battalion was now to re-organize, re-equip, and to receive two large re-enforcement drafts, on August 14 and 15.



Private McNeil was a soldier of that second draft.

(Right above: Canadian and German wounded from the first days of the battle – some cases more serious than others - waiting to be evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir)

* * * * *

It was to be a further two days before the 5th Battalion resumed its advance when the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade relieved the 9th Brigade (also Canadian Infantry) on the night of August 16-17. The initial momentum of the push had slowed after the success of the first days: bringing forward guns, munitions and supplies in the quantities necessary was not easy; fatigue was a factor; time was spent consolidating the newly-won positions; and the German soldier, formidable and skilled, was still willing and able to inflict punishment on those facing him.

The 5th Battalion was back in Warvillers at about mid-day of August 21, its place having been taken in the line by a regiment of French troops. This was the first step in the transfer of the 5th Battalion back whence it had come only two weeks earlier. In fact, the entire Canadian Corps was to retrace its steps – in the same manner, by night, and by routes well to the west, before being carried by bus and train – back to the Arras Sector*.

**Most of the retiring Canadian units were to be replaced by French troops.*

Only days hence, the Canadians in tandem with British troops were to be in action once more, in another theatre, driving along the axis of the main Arras-Cambrai Road, through the battlefields of 1917. This advance was to end only on November 11, when the War-ending Armistice would come into effect.

However, in the meantime, there was work to do. By the night of August 26-27 – in fact at three in the morning – Private McNeil's Battalion had reached its destination, billets at Anzin just to the north-west of Arras.

But the first Canadian troops to return from the *Third Battle of Amiens* to the Arras Sector had not been the 5th Battalion and the 1st Canadian Division. By the time that Private McNeil and his unit were settling down into those billets in Anzin, the *Battle of the Scarpe* was already almost a day old, the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the Canadian Corps having advanced some five kilometres on August 26, and having captured Monchy-le-Preux* on that same day.

**This was where, on April 14 of 1917, the Newfoundland Regiment had lost four-hundred eighty-seven killed, wounded and missing in a failed attempt to take the place.*

(Right: *The re-constructed village of Monchy-le-Preux as seen from the western side: A bronze Newfoundland Caribou stands in its centre to commemorate the events and sacrifices of April 14, 1917. – photograph from 2014*)



By early in the morning of August 29 the 5th Battalion had moved through Arras and along the main road leading to Cambrai. It had then taken up support positions in the area of Vis-en-Artois where it would still be on the next day while troops of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade advanced almost two kilometres, encountering little or no opposition.

(Right: *Vis-en-Artois British Cemetery: The cemetery contains 2,369 soldiers of the Great War – originally mostly from 1918 - of whom only 885 have been identified. – photograph from 2010*)



August 31 passed in exactly the same manner, the 5th Battalion still in support and still awaiting orders to advance. During this three-day period the German artillery, usually so ferociously efficient was totally ineffective: the entire casualty count of the Battalion for that period amounted to five men wounded and two mules killed.

On September 1, Private McNeil's unit had attacked. The German response, however, had not been as ineffectual as that of the previous days when the advance had literally been a walk-over. The Battalion now lost heavily to mortar-fire, to rifle-fire and most particularly to machine-gun fire. In the end the enemy had been forced to retire but apparently, he was still far from finished as a fighting force, as the two-hundred thirty-five casualties of the day were to testify.

Casualty report: 1-9-18 Previously reported Missing, now Killed in Action

While taking part in the attack with his Battalion on the enemy line, East of Hendecourt-les-Cagnicourt Dury Road, South East of Vis en Artois, he was hit in the stomach and instantly killed by enemy machine-gun bullets.

The son of Neil McNeil, former fisherman likely deceased on April 9, 1911, and of Margaret McNeil* (née *McQuarry*) – to whom he had willed his all on the day of his attestation and to whom he had, as of February 1, 1918, allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay – of Little River, Codroy, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Allan, Donald, Effie-Ann, Elizabeth, John and to Neil-Joseph**.

****At the time of his enlistment her address was still Little River.***

*****St. Anne's Parish Records document all of the above family information but not the birth of Daniel McNeil of these parents. Confirmation – or refutation - would be appreciated.***

Private McNeil was reported as having been killed in action on September 1, 1918, in fighting in the vicinity of Vis-en-Artois.

Daniel McNeil had enlisted at the *apparent age* of thirty-two years and five months: date of birth (attestation papers) August 24, 1885, in Little River, Codroy, Newfoundland. (The American border crossing document shows the year as 1887.)

Private Daniel McNeil 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.

