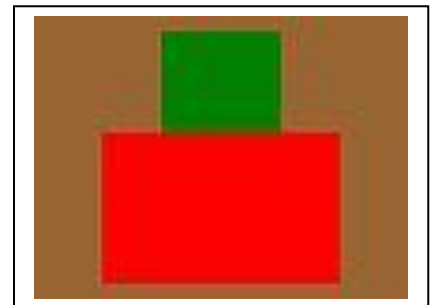




Private Augustine (also found as *Augustus*) Joseph Meehan, Number A36070 of the 4th Battalion (*Central Ontario Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, lies in Bois-Carré British Cemetery, Thélus: Grave reference I.C.24.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 4th Battalion (Central Ontario Regiment) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation, as early as 1904 in St. John's, Newfoundland, recorded as that of a clerk, Augustine Joseph Meehan has left little behind him to tell of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Alberta. It is true that several Joseph (and J.) Meehans – or perhaps a single one on several occasions - are (is) recorded as having crossed the Cabot Strait during the years prior to the Great War, for the most part on their (his) way to the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton, but the records are not conclusive enough to suggest that any one of them (or all) might be the subject of this dossier.

Be that as it may, it is certain that by the first month of 1915, A.J. Meehan had found his way to the Albertan capital city of Edmonton*, for it was both then and there that he enlisted.

**Named as provincial capital only nine years before, in 1906.*

Not only did he enlist on January 4 of 1915, but the records also have him undergoing medical examination and attestation on that same date. The formalities – which in other cases took weeks to complete – were brought to a conclusion later on that day when the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald de Lotbinière Harwood, of the 51st Battalion (*Edmonton*), Canadian Expeditionary Force – by which unit the now-Private Meehan had been *taken on strength* – 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.*

The main body of the 51st (*Edmonton*) Battalion was now to remain in Canada for the next fifteen months, undergoing training at *Sarcee Camp* near Calgary - when the weather gods permitted it.

However, after having fought the *Second Battle of Ypres* at the end of April and the beginning of May of 1915, this closely followed by the actions at Festubert and Givenchy (see further below), the Canadian Division was in need of re-enforcements to make good its losses. Thus the First Draft of the 51st Battalion, whose numbers included Private Meehan, was ordered overseas within five months of his enlistment.

Having travelled the three-thousand five-hundred kilometres to Montréal, Private Meehan's re-enforcement draft, as well as the First Draft of the 50th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Calgary*), embarked on June 14, 1915, in the company of an unspecified number of horses onto the cargo ship *Eagle Point** for passage to the United Kingdom. Having taken its charges – and chargers – on board, the vessel sailed later on that same day.

**Eagle Point was torpedoed in the Atlantic by a U-boat on March 28 of the following year; the ship was lost but apparently her entire crew survived.*

Private Meehan is recorded as having set foot on English soil on June 28, some two weeks later, likely in the English south-coast naval port of Devonport-Plymouth, and from there with his draft was transported by train to *Shorncliffe*, the large Canadian military complex being established on the Dover Straits in the county of Kent and in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone.

(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 2016)

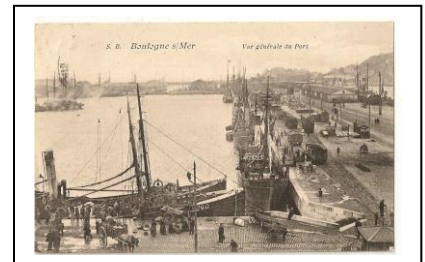


Having immediately been transferred upon his arrival at *Shorncliffe* to the 9th Reserve Infantry Battalion, Private Meehan was to spend a mere five weeks in training before joining another unit. On this occasion the transfer of August 3 was on paper as the unit, the 4th Battalion (*Central Ontario Regiment*), was already in service on the Continent in Belgium. On that same date a re-enforcement draft was despatched across the English Channel – likely through Folkestone and the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite, although this is not confirmed.



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

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



On August 8, 1915, having travelled to the north of France and across the Franco-Belgian frontier, the draft of one-hundred ninety-eight other ranks reported *to duty* with the 4th Battalion, by then serving in the *Ploegsteert Sector* of Belgian Flanders.

* * * * *

The 4th Battalion was a component of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian Division. The Battalion had been among the first to sail from Canada to the United Kingdom in early October of 1914 and, having then spent some four months in England, in mid-February of 1915 had landed with the Canadian Division in France at the port of Saint-Nazaire.

The Battalion had then, only days after its arrival in France, been posted to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier, and had entered the trenches for the first time near the northern French town of Armentières. It had subsequently served in the *Fleurbaix Sector* just to the south of the border before having been posted to the *Ypres Salient*; it had been on April 18, at twenty-five minutes past ten in the morning, that the unit – in fact, the entire 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade - was to cross the border into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.



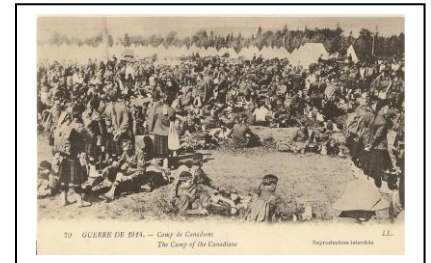
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(Preceding page: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could designate any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet.* – from a vintage post-card)

The Brigade had crossed the frontier to the west of the Belgian town of Poperinghe where it was then to remain for two days before having advanced eastwards to Vlamertinghe for a *further* two days. It was at that moment that the Germans had launched their attack in an effort to take possession of the nearby city of Ypres.

The other units of the Canadian Division had been serving in the *Ypres Salient* for only a short space of time, having just replaced French Army units in the trenches. During these few days of Canadian tenure *the Salient* had proved to be relatively quiet. Then the dam had broken - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, was to threaten to sweep all before it.

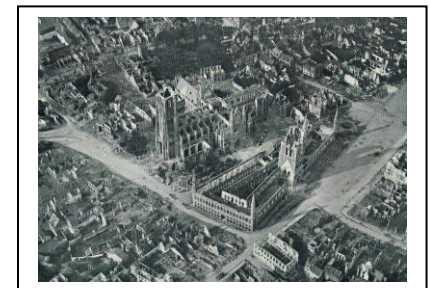
(Right: *The caption reads merely 'Camp of Canadians' but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely to be in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are from a Canadian-Scottish unit.* – from a vintage post-card)



The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right below: *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 to be little left standing.* – from *Illustration*)

The *2nd Battle of Ypres* was to see the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Gas was later to become an everyday event and, with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the 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 was to prove 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*)



That cloud had 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 on the Canadian left had wavered then had broken, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered. At that moment a retreat, not always very cohesive, had become necessary while, at the same time, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Infantry Brigade had been ordered forward to support the efforts of the French and of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade.

At the time, the 4th Battalion had been reported as still being at Vlamertinghe, a village to the west of Ypres and at least ten kilometres distant. There was also the rubble of the city of Ypres to be traversed. The unit began to march towards the fighting at thirty minutes past mid-night on April 23. The fighting has apparently been found as, by the evening of the same day, the Battalion War Diarist was recording in his entry a total of just over five-hundred casualties.

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

By the second day of the German offensive, April 23, the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan were to hold fast until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement had become necessary.



At times there had been breeches in the defensive positions but, fortunately, either the Germans had been unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they had not had the means of exploiting the situation. And then the Canadians had begun to fill in the gaps.

The 4th Battalion had continued to retreat before digging-in in the area of Wieltje. There it had remained until its relief on the evening of April 25. Having retired through the village of St-Jean (*Sin-Jaan*), the unit was to take up positions in reserve trenches on the east bank of the *Yser Canal*.

There it had remained during the night in the company of the 1st Battalion of Canadian Infantry. Early the following morning, April 26, having crossed the Canal it had taken up positions on the west bank of the waterway where it would remain for the next three days.



(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 4th Battalion had returned to its billets at Vlamertinghe on April 29. There the unit had been greeted by a re-enforcement draft of fifteen officers and five-hundred twenty-three *other ranks* – losses had been heavy.

There the Battalion was to remain for three further days in the vicinity of Vlamertinghe after which time it – and others - had been withdrawn further, in fact, back into France.



(continued)

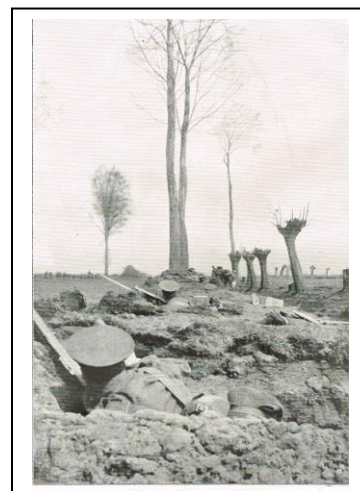
(Preceding page: *The Yser Canal at a point in the northern outskirts of Ypres almost a century after the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion retired to its western bank – to the left – photograph from 2014*)

Thus at nine o'clock in the evening of May 2, Private Meehan's 4th Battalion began to march the twenty-five kilometres or so to the French northern town of Bailleul on just the other side of the Franco-Belgian frontier – apparently many of the troops arrived there completely exhausted. It was now to spend the next number of days there in re-grouping and re-organizing.

Less than two weeks later again, on or about May 16, the 4th Battalion was ordered to move down the line, further into France via St-Floris and Essars, towards the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further to the south again and had asked for British support.

(Right: *Troops in hastily-dug trenches at Ypres. It was to be 1916 before any of the belligerent armies equipped its troops with steel helmets. – from Illustration*)

There at Festubert, a series of attacks and counter-attacks were to take place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left after *Second Ypres**, of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – having a lesser number of troops – would not participate to the same extent. It nonetheless, proportionally, suffered heavily.



**The Second Battle of Ypres was not exclusively a Canadian affair. The British were also heavily involved as indeed was the PPCLI Battalion (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) which was serving in a British brigade at the time.*

The Canadian Division and Indian troops - the 7th (Meerut) Division* of the Indian Army also having been ordered to serve at Festubert – were to fare hardly any better than the British, each contingent incurring over two-thousand casualties, some fifteen per cent of strength, before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – through the use of the same tactics - was likewise a failure, but on an even larger scale; it cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

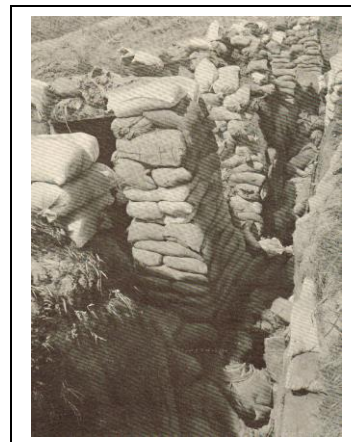
**The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

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



The 4th Battalion entered into the reserve trenches at Festubert on May 22. It was still there three days later, on May 25, when the War Diarist entered the following into his journal: *In reserve trenches at Festubert, heavy shelling all day and night at frequent intervals. Have had all the time considerable trouble to keep up our communications as the shrapnel cuts our wires. The signalling section are doing excellent work...*

(Right: German trenches nick-named the Labyrinth captured by the French at their pyrrhic victory at Notre-Dame de Lorette – Over one-hundred thousand French troops died during this campaign in the Artois. – from *Illustration*)



Soon afterwards, during the month of June, Canadian troops were to be fighting not-so-many kilometres to the south again, in the area of Givenchy-les-la-Bassée, still in support of the ongoing French campaign. Because the actions were fewer and less ambitious there were fewer casualties, but casualties there were...and they were incurred for the same reasons as at Festubert.

By June 17, the Canadian Division was beginning to retire from the area of Givenchy*, the 4th Battalion being among the first to do so.

**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 4th Battalion was to march on June 17 to billets in or near to the community of Oblinghem, two kilometres removed from the larger community of Béthune. From there on June 25, it began to move towards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert – it is also the name of a community - there the 4th Battalion would remain – as would the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it was to become 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.

(Right: *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*)

The Canadian Division* was to remain in that border area of West Flanders until March and April of the following year when its services were to be required in the southern area of the *Ypres Salient*.



(continued)

****With the arrival of the 2nd Canadian Division on the Continent in September of 1915, the Canadian Division became designated as the 1st Canadian Division.***

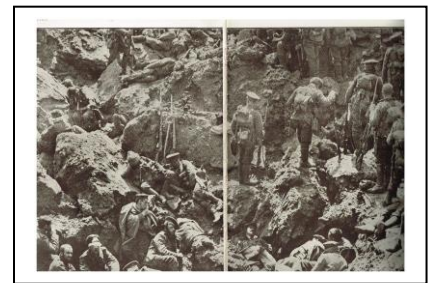
* * * * *

It was during this relatively benign period, on August 8, in the *Ploegsteert Sector* and at positions such as *Ploegsteert Wood* and the picturesquely-named *Piggeries* that Private Meehan's draft reported to the 4th Battalion

For the following number of months, up until June of 1916, on the fronts for which the 1st Canadian and the lately-arrived 3rd Canadian Division* were responsible – including the normally lethal *Ypres Salient* into which both formations were ordered in April and March of 1916 respectively - neither side made any concerted attempt to dislodge the other from its muddy quarters in the trenches**. As it was with all the other units at the front, the 4th Battalion's time was divided between postings to the front-line trenches, to the support positions, and into reserve (see further below). Casualties were caused mostly by artillery fire***, by snipers, and in infrequent infantry actions such as a raid on the enemy lines.

****The 3rd Canadian Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916.***

*****There was to be an altercation in late March and early April of 1916 in an area further south towards the Franco-Belgian frontier. However, the action of the St-Éloi Craters had at first involved British troops before Canadian battalions of the 2nd Division played their part – but the 4th Battalion (Central Ontario) was, of course, a unit of the Canadian 1st Division and thus was to play no role whatsoever.***



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

******It is estimated that over sixty percent of the all the casualties of the Great War were due to artillery-fire.***

It was towards the end of this *quiet time* that Private Meehan, after almost ten months of service in Belgium, was granted a nine-day period of leave back to the United Kingdom. It is not documented as to where he decided to spend this time – London might be a good but unconfirmed guess – but the dates, including allowance for travel, were May 30 to June 9 inclusive, this latter being the day on which he was to report back to duty.



Thus Private Meehan was not to be with his unit during the first week of the action described below, but he likely played his anonymous role in its bloody conclusion.

(Right above: *Marble Arch, in the City of Westminster, Greater London, at some time just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooze*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: *Mount Sorrel*.

(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches – the iron-work reconstituted - 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 enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, overran the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were afforded the time to patch up their defences.

But Sir Julian Byng's* hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated and supported, proved to be a horrendous and costly experience for the Canadians.

**The British officer commanding the Canadian Corps.*

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



The German attack had primarily been on the part of the front held by the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division but such was its ferocity that units from the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions were called upon to help stabilize the situation.

The 4th Battalion had thus been sent forward from the rear area on the afternoon of June 2 to positions in the area of Dickebusch. It moved forward again, not to the forward area but to the vicinity of *Chateau Segard* on the morrow, June 3. There it was to remain until June 8, unperturbed by events until sporadically shelled on the two final days before being relieved. It then retired – now accompanied by the returned Private Meehan - through the rubble of Dickebusch to *Camp 'C'* to rest and to prepare for things to come.

Those *things to come* commenced during the morning and afternoon of June 12 when the. *...units were at the disposal of their unit commanders for the purpose of organizing & equipping (sic) men for the attack.*

(continued)

Bn. moved off commencing with C.Coy. at 6.15 remaining coys. and details followed at 15 minutes intervals. Bn. reported all settled in assembly trenches at 12.10 A.M. 13th June ready to support 13 & 16th Can. Bns. (Excerpts from 4th Battalion War Diary entry for June 12, 1916)

The opening bombardment for what was to prove to be the final attack of the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* opened at fifteen minutes to one o'clock on the morning of June 13 with the first infantry advance coming forty minutes later. The 4th Battalion, however, was not in the opening wave of the assault but rather was in support of the 13th and 16th Battalions of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade.

Despite the reported incessant enemy shelling – the mud for once apparently playing a positive role in absorbing much of the destructive force of many of the missiles – the Canadian attack was a success and the Germans were forced out of the positions that they had overrun eleven days previously during the first hours of their attack. Both sides were by now – apart for a small German gain in the area of *Hooze* – back where they had started on June 2.

It was status quo – except that the cemeteries were now a little larger.

Some of the dead from that ultimate attack were of the 4th Battalion: twenty-three *killed in action* and one-hundred twenty-five *wounded ...practically* – so reports the War Diarist – *all from shellfire*.

(Right: A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60* to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature. – photograph from 2014)

**It was apparently much more of a hill before June of 1917 when a British mine blew off its summit on the opening day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge.*

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

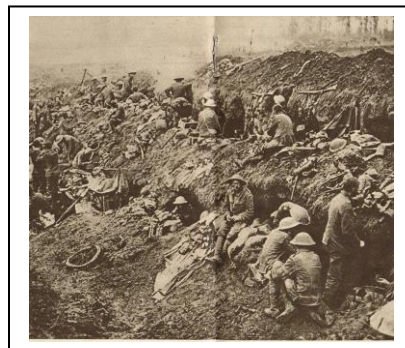
June 14 was another day of heavy shelling, but the expected counter-attacks did not amount to much and were beaten off. Gradually, with each passing day, the Battalion War Diarist was able to begin to turn his attentions to such things as feet, church parades and baths.

The remainder of June, and then July and August were relatively quiet in *the Salient*, the Canadians being subjected only to what had by then become the routines, rigours – and perils - of trench warfare*.

(continued)



****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 (see below) in the autumn of 1916, only months later, by that time having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)

But things were happening elsewhere on the *Western Front* and by the middle of August the Canadians of the 4th Battalion were in training in anticipation of a move southward into France, and to the area of *the Somme*. These exercises were to take place in northern France for some two weeks by which time the troops were considered to be prepared for what was optimistically being called *open warfare*.

By the end of the month the 1st Canadian Brigade had already arrived in the area of the battle-front and by August 31st its troops were relieving the 7th Australian Brigade and 46th Battalion in the front-line trenches facing Bapaume.

(Right: Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph on the preceding page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles*, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from The War Illustrated)



****The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it jammed, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.***

By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

(continued)

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

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

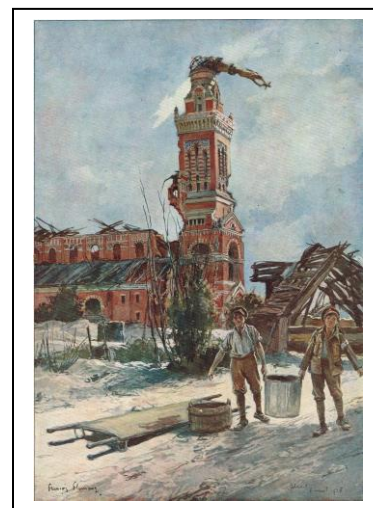
(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette. – photograph from 2015*)

For the 4th Battalion the first taste of the forward lines at *the Somme* was to last for five days – from September 4 when it had moved up to relieve the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion, until September 9 when it in turn was relieved to withdraw to Albert, the large provincial town nearby, and to *Brickfields Camp* in close proximity. There had been no infantry action undertaken by Private Meehan's unit on that first tour, but the enemy artillery had been particularly horrendous.



As of September 11, the 4th Battalion (*Central Ontario Regiment*) began to march. It was not to be involved in the upcoming offensive which was planned for four days hence, thus it was likely ordered on its way to free up billets for those incoming troops who were. Private Meehan thus had marched for six days by the time his unit returned to Albert. It remained there and at the nearby *Brickfields Camp* until September 18.

The offensive of September 15 had run its costly course by then and the 4th battalion was to move up to relieve other Canadian units in the trenches. It was at first warmly received by the German guns and then, on the morrow, by enemy infantry who attacked in force but who were repulsed. Two days later again, on September 21, the unit was withdrawn into Brigade Support.



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

(continued)

A second prolonged route march was now in the offing for Private Meehan and the other personnel of the 4th Battalion. Setting out on September 25, it followed much the itinerary of the previous trek of two weeks before – Warloy, Val de Maison, Halloy – where the unit spent five days undergoing instruction and training - Val de Maison, Contay, Albert and finally *Tara Valley Camp* where it bivouacked on October 5.

In its absence a further three offensives had gone ahead: the *Battle of Morval* of September 25 to 28 which did not involve any Canadian formations; the *Battle of Thiepval* of September 26 to 28 in which units of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Canadian Divisions had fought; and now there was the still-ongoing *Battle of Le Transloy**, the entire Canadian Corps of by now four divisions acting as the Reserve Army.



**During which the Newfoundland Regiment was to fight at Guedecourt on October 12.*

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

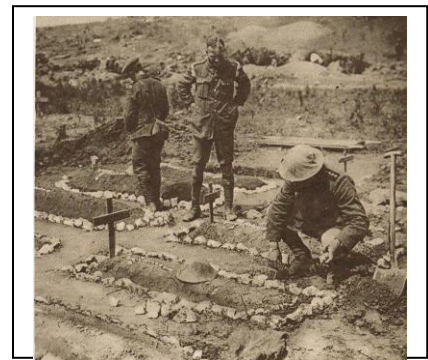
The 4th Battalion was still in its quarters at *Tara Valley Camp* on October 7 when its personnel was ordered to prepare for battle.

(Excerpt from 4th Battalion War Diary entry for October 7, 1916) *The following issued to men:- (1) 170 Rounds (50 extra) S.A.A. (Small Arms Ammunition) to each man except Battalion Bombers (2) 4 Mills Grenades and 3 Sandbags tied to belt (3) 2 Days rations in addition to Iron-rations.*

Each company carried:- (1) 1 Man per section, 12 bombs in sandbags (2) 3 Very Pistols and 48 Very lights (white) (3) 12 Very lights (Green) for C & D Companies (4) 12 Very lights (Red) for A & B Companies (5) 2 Sets of S.O.S. rockets (6) 9 Ground Flares (Red) for signalling to contact aeroplanes.

Battalion left position at 6.30 p.m. and relieved the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion in the trenches. Relief complete 12 midnight.

The Battalion was reported as having attacked the German trenches at ten minutes to five in the morning. ... *1st Objective gained, but battalion was driven back to assembly trenches by enemy counter attack at 1. 45 p.m.* (Excerpt from War Diary entry for October 8, 1916) The War Diary Appendix a propos the operation cites a lack of ammunition and grenades as being a prime reason for the failure.



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

After then having spent a heavily-shelled night in what had been the assembly trenches of the day before, on October 9 the Battalion was relieved and retired to Albert.

On the morrow, Private Meehan and the entire 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade began the long march away from the *First Battle of the Somme*.

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



From Albert the column moved westward, following a route which was to take the Brigade around to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond. By the evening of October 25, Private Seward's Battalion had marched to – and was in the trenches in the vicinity of the villages of - Carency and Souchez, just to the south-west of the mining-centre and city of Lens.



(Right above: *The villages in the area surrounding Souchez already looked like this – this is Souchez itself - in 1915 when the British took over responsibility for the area from the French Army. – from Le Miroir*)

This area, comprising sectors from the town of Béthune in the north almost to Arras in the south was to become by Christmas of that year more and more the responsibility of the Canadian Corps. In the meantime, as the Canadian units withdrew after service at *the Somme*, it was towards this region that they marched, and in this region that they were to spend the upcoming winter of 1916-1917.



(Right above: *This image is of the historic northern town of Béthune by the end of the Great War, but by the winter of 1917 its destruction was already well under way. – from a vintage post-card*)

The months following the transfer of the 4th Battalion were to be one of the everyday grind of life in and out of the trenches. There was to be little if any infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids – major and minor - of which the British High Command appears to have been becoming increasingly fond.

There was still a daily count of casualties, as ever caused mostly by the enemy's artillery-fire and by his snipers, but it was sickness, of all kinds, that kept the medical services busy: tonsillitis, influenza, bronchitis and pneumonia – and at times tuberculosis - conjunctivitis, scabies, trench-foot and frost-bite, venereal disease, debility, the list goes on...as well as the standard cuts, bumps and bruises - and a perhaps surprising amount of dental work.



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

During this quiet time, all of the Canadian units were withdrawn in rotation to rest – but also to train – in the rear areas: parades; presentation of decorations; inspections; bayonet fighting; route marches; musketry; drill; instruction; physical training; familiarization with weapons both *ours* and *theirs*; visits from politicians, brass and per-times royalty; and on the lighter side, sports and the occasional concert – even a bath from time to time.

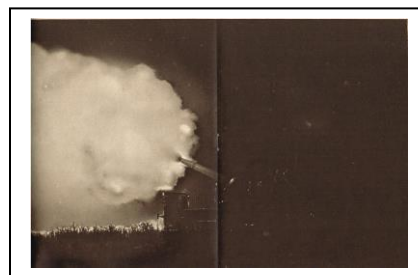
According to the 4th Battalion War Diary entries for the winter months, it would appear that Private Meehan's unit was not to take part in any raid; usually the most perilous thing to be reported was the frequent gas alert. New gases, mustard and phosgene, were coming into use and the means of delivery was now by gas shells – the vagaries of the wind were no longer of much importance. Even so, there does not appear to have been any crisis on the 4th Battalion front.

The month of March, apart from the last three days, was spent by the unit behind the lines in either resting – of which there was not usually a great deal – or in training. Something was obviously in the offing and the troops were busy digesting new tactics: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts...

...and at *Vimy Ridge*, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the approach of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.

On March 28, Private Meehan was awarded seven days of Field Punishment No. 1 for having been *Absent Without Leave* while in the field. There appear to be no further details of the incident.

As those final days were to pass, the artillery barrage was growing progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion was to describe it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were *also* aware that...something was in the offing...and their guns in their turn were now throwing retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy.



(Right above: A heavy British artillery piece spews its venom into the middle of the night during the course of the preparatory bombardment before the First Battle of Arras. – from *Illustration*)

**It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.*

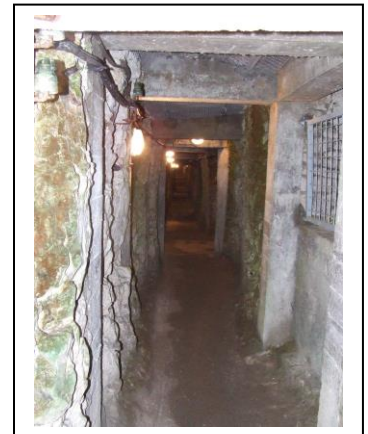
On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive not only at Vimy Ridge, but also in a large area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields of the previous year; this was the *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes being that Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



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

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

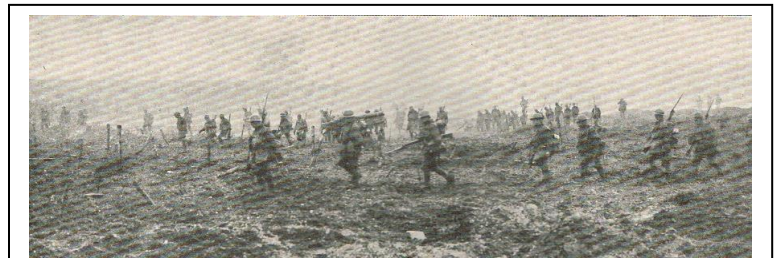
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



The attack on *Vimy Ridge* had taken place on the opening day of the five-week-long *Battle of Arras*. The days and weeks that followed were to be less auspicious than had been those first days, April 9 and 10, and the realities of life in the trenches were soon to take hold once more.

That early success was not to be repeated by the Canadians until the summer of 1918.

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



It was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which were to storm the *Ridge* itself. On the immediate right of that attack was the 2nd Canadian Division plus a British brigade to which had been allotted the task of clearing the slope in the area of the village of Thélus. The 1st Canadian Division was operating to the right again, further south down the slope where it sweeps past the community of Roclincourt and towards the city of Arras.



(continued)

(Preceding page: Wounded were also evacuated by tram-line and light-railway systems which were built right behind the advancing troops. As seen here, at times prisoners aided with the evacuation – and enemy wounded were reportedly evacuated at the same time. – from Illustration)

As for Private Meehan's unit, some days still before the offensive was to begin, and after a short period in the forward area at the end of March, the 4th Battalion had been withdrawn again, to the area of Mont St-Éloi and Écoivres. It was to remain there until the early afternoon of April 8 when it was ordered forward into the assembly areas. Private Meehan and his comrades-in-arms were not, however, to move via those well-documented tunnels but by over-ground routes to their assembly positions where they were reported to be in place by one-thirty in the morning of April 9.

(Excerpts from 4th Battalion (Central Ontario) War Diary Appendix for April 9, 1917)

Zero hour was 5.30 a.m. The enemy placed a rather feeble barrage on ELBE TRENCH and between that and ROCADE, but no hit was made on any of our ASSEMBLY Trenches, although one man was slightly wounded by shrapnel.

7.30 a.m. The Battalion advanced in the following order, A, C, B, D, Details. Not the slightest difficulty was experienced in finding the bridges, gaps in wire, &c. up to our front line. The companies advanced successively over the same ground and four bridges or crossing places had been made on this frontage, permitting all platoons to move at the same time. NO MAN'S LAND was crossed...(and)...the units found no difficulty in locating themselves in the German trenches... "A" Company reached its allotted position by 8.00 a.m. and by 9.00 a.m. the Battalion was in position... Only four casualties were recorded up to this point...

At 9.55 a.m. the barrage lifted off the left and at 10.05 a.m. off the right, of the Battalion frontage and the advance to the BLUE objective was begun... The advance progressed steadily, following the barrage, and the objective was reached on time. Some casualties occurred during this period, one or two due to our own shell fire. The enemy's artillery was ineffective, and there was very little Machine Gun or Rifle Fire...

12.26 p.m. At this time the barrage moved forward towards the BROWN objective and was followed immediately by B & D Companies... Some prisoners were captured in BOIS CARRE which was mopped up by "C" Co'y.

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



On three further occasions the barrage lifted to begin anew for further advances, but the fighting was by then very limited and by four o'clock in the afternoon there was little movement further forward. This was not because of German resistance: orders had been issued beforehand to consolidate captured objectives - in anticipation of German counter-attacks - and to send out patrols to allow for sufficient warning to be given thereof.

No casualty figures appear in this particular Appendix although, judging from the overall report, they were much fewer in number than had been anticipated. Nevertheless, the 4th Battalion was to lose at least one private soldier on that day...

(Right above: *A memorial to the fallen of the 1st Canadian Division stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017*)

Casualty report: *Killed in Action - He was killed by a shell during an advance from South West of Thélus to Farbus.*

The son of Charles Edward Meehan, deceased April 20, 1920, former clerk of the St. John's Municipal Council, then of the Bank of Montreal, and of Mary Ellen Meehan (née *Kelly*) of 5, Monkstown Road (and earlier of 17, Garrison Hill), St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to William-Patrick, Charles-Leo, John(?), Ellen (also *Helen*)-Mary, to Hubert-Michael* and to Charles-Kelly**.

**Lance Corporal Hubert Michael Meehan, Number 69607 of the 26th Battalion (New Brunswick), is buried in La Laiterie Military Cemetery, Belgium: Grave reference II. B. 29. He was reported as having been killed in action on November 18, 1915. (His story to be found elsewhere in these documents)*

(Right above: *The grave of Lance Corporal H.M. Meehan in La Laiterie Military Cemetery, Belgium – photograph from 2014*)

***Sapper Charles Kelly Meehan, Number 3259665, also served during the Great War in the 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st New Brunswick Regiment: called up, May 31, 1918; sailed to England June 29, 1918; returned to Canada having served only in United Kingdom.*

Private Augustine Joseph Meehan was reported as having been *killed in action* while serving with the Canadian 4th Battalion (Central Ontario Regiment) at Vimy Ridge on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917.

Augustine Joseph Meehan had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-eight years and two months: date of birth at St. John's, Newfoundland, November 21, 1887.

(Right above: *On this fallen memorial to Charles and Mary Meehan in Belvedere Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's are also commemorated their two sons, Hubert Michael and Augustine Joseph, both of whom laid down their lives during the course of the Great War. – photograph from 2015*)

(continued)



Private Augustine Joseph Meehan was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



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.