



Pioneer Thomas Mercer (Number 489365) of the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today Ieper): Panel reference 32.

(Right: The image of the cap-badge of the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers. is from the Militarybadgcollection.com web-site.)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a seaman, Thomas Mercer appears to have left little information in his wake a propos his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. More than one Thomas (or simply *T.*) Mercer is documented on the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* as having made the crossing from Port aux Basques to North Sydney in the years prior to and early on during the War, each on his way to the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton, there to work as a labourer, but there is not enough to allow any of them to be identified as the young man of this particular dossier.

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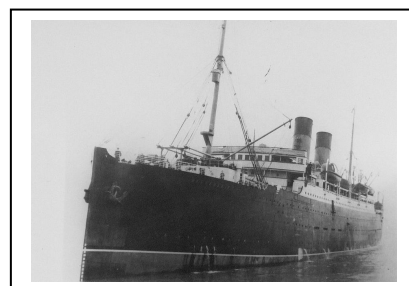
All that can be said with certainty is that he was in the area of the provincial capital of Halifax during the final month of 1915, for that was where and where he enlisted.

It was on either December 27 or 28 – both dates are cited – that Thomas Mercer presented himself in that city for medical examination, enlistment and attestation. On the first day of the New Year, 1916, he was *taken on strength* by the 66th Regiment (*Princess Louise Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Militia, the formalities of his enlistment coming to a conclusion on that same day when the Lieutenant Colonel commanding the Regiment 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.*

It was with the 66th Regiment – not to be confused with the 66th *Battalion* - that Private Mercer was now to train for the mere three weeks left until his departure from Halifax for overseas service.

**Canadian Militia units were forbidden by law to operate outside the borders of the country. However, there was nothing to preclude these already-established units from recruiting on behalf of a newly-forming Overseas Battalion.*

On January 22 Private Mercer, now a soldier of the 1st Draft of the 66th Regiment boarded His Majesty's Transport *Missanabie* in the harbour at Halifax for passage to the United Kingdom. The unit was not to travel alone: according to the CEF Study Group's dossier a propos troopships, on the vessel were also the 2nd Draft of the 66th Battalion (*Edmonton Guards*); the 1st Draft of the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*); the 5th Draft, 'C' Section, of the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance; and the Number 2 Canadian Tunnelling Company.



(Right above: *The photograph of the SS Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Missanabie sailed from Canadian waters on the same January 22 to dock eight days later in the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport at which time Private Mercers' draft was transported to the area of the Dover Straits



in the county of Kent, to Shorncliffe, soon to be transformed into a large Canadian military establishment.

(Right above: *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*)

Posted there to East Sandling, one of the subsidiary camps, the draft was immediately absorbed by the 17th Canadian Reserve Battalion. There it was to remain undergoing further training for a further five weeks when at least some of its personnel, Private Mercer among that number, were transferred once more.

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On this occasion, on March 2, he was *taken on strength* by the 2nd Battalion of the Canadian Pioneers, stationed at the time at Hazely Down in the southern county of Hampshire. Only days later again, on March 9, now-Pioneer Mercer was on his way to the Continent.

(Right: *Troops marching at a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp on an uncertain date during the winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated*)

**It would seem that he was taken on strength only on paper by the 2nd Pioneers on March 2, and therefore was despatched directly to Le Havre from Shorncliffe rather than via Hazely Down. Thus it was that Pioneer Mercer passed through nearby Folkestone and then Boulogne on the French coast opposite.*

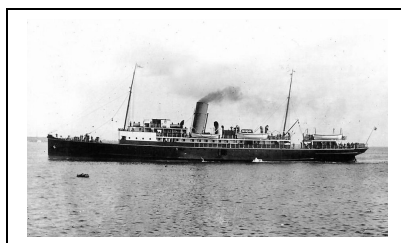
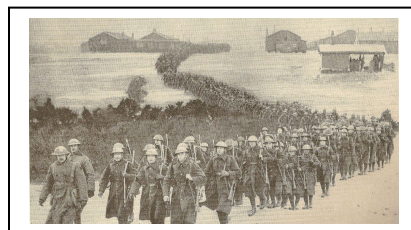
His detachment of one-hundred eighty *other ranks* plus a single officer from Shorncliffe, having travelled to France via Folkestone and the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite, reported to the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers two days later. The date was March 11 and by that time, the Pioneer Battalion was at *Scherpenberg Barracks* (see below) in the Kingdom of Belgium.

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

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

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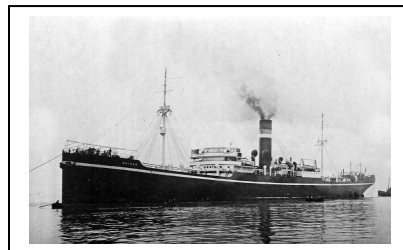
Meanwhile, on March 7, 1916, the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion had taken ship in the English south-coast port of Southampton: on board the *Caesarea* were twenty-two officers and five-hundred fourteen *other ranks*; eight officers and two-



hundred forty-eight *other ranks* travelled on *Maidan*, this vessel also carrying the Battalion's transport and stores.

On the following morning, March 8, the two ships docked in Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.

For those who had taken ship on *Caesarea*, then, upon arrival in Le Havre, they were to spend the remainder of the day in a rest camp; however, the troops who had crossed to France on the second ship were to work for the next number of hours, unloading everything that *Maidan* carried.



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(Preceding page: *The images of Caesarea (top) and Maiden are both from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

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

At midnight of that same day, the Pioneers entrained and travelled north to the town of Bailleul on the Franco-Belgian border. It was a journey which took them some twenty-two hours, their travels subsequently terminating with a ten-kilometre march to *Scherpenberg Barracks* where the unit arrived at three o'clock in the morning on March 10.



It was there, on the morrow, March 11, that Pioneer Mercer was to join his new unit.

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The work of a pioneer battalion was unlike that of a regular battalion and each Canadian division had its own Pioneer battalion*. The Canadian 2nd Pioneer Battalion was attached to the Canadian 2nd Division upon its arrival on the Continent in March 1916 and thus was stationed in Belgium with the Division during the earlier days of its war.

**All the Canadian Pioneer battalions except the 2nd had ceased to exist by the end of the year 1917, disbanded and absorbed by other units, often of the Canadian Engineers. The same fate befell the 2nd Battalion in May of 1918.*

Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction and repairing, and also the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his physique and also for his experience in such work.



(Right above: *The caption to the image, translated, reads: Canadian sappers building a road somewhere... 'in liberated territory' – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

**In fact, much of the work done was also the responsibility at times of the Engineers.*

Often working under fire, the Pioneers shared the dangers of life at the front with all the other troops which were stationed there and were at times obliged to act as regular infantry. On March 27, 'B' and 'C' Companies of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, during a German counter-attack at St-Éloi, were... *in trenches. Took part in operations connected with the action... Casualties "B" Company 1 killed, 8 wounded, "C" Company 1 killed, 2 wounded.* (Excerpt from the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion War Diary)



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And while it is true that the Pioneer battalions had been formed to perform duties different from those of the regular infantry units, their way of life and the routines, rigours – and perils - of the trenches were oft-times very similar.

(Preceding page: *Perhaps staged, a photograph of the aftermath of the detonation of a mine under enemy positions: The image is from the period of the Action of the St-Éloi Craters.* – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration*)

The confrontation described above took place officially from March 27, 1916, to April 17 when the 2nd Canadian Division – of which the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, was a unit - underwent its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation. It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on that former date, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then followed up with an infantry attack. The role of the newly-arrived Canadian formation was to later pursue the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the often putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and then a resolute German defence, all greeted the Canadians when they relieved the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no record of the Company in which Pioneer Mercer was serving during the period of the *Action of the St. Éloi Craters*. On April 10, only 'A' and 'C' Company reported having incurred casualties, a total of three *killed in action* and eight *wounded*, while working in trenches and craters.

However, on the night of April 11-12 all four Companies were reported as follows by the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, War Diarist: *On the night of the 11th/12th Lieut. Parker and party of 50 men from "A" Coy. worked on crater No. 1, building bomb storehouse and shelter trench under 4th Field Co. C.E. Lieut. Petrie and party of 71 men from "A" Coy. constructed 600 yards of 4 strand wire fence in the R. trench under the 5th Field Co. "B" Coy. and party of 129 Other Ranks and 3 Officers under Capt. Gibson on the night of the 11th/12th worked constructing the R.6 trenches. 2 casualties were reported.*

“C” Company – On the night of the 11th/12th a party of 50 Other Ranks under Lieut. McGhie worked digging a communication trench from crater No. 5 to the old front line.

“D” Company – On the night of the 11th/12th a party of 68 Other Ranks under Lieut. Galway put up a 4 wire fence on both sides of the Ypres-St Eloi Road for about 500 yards. 2 casualties were reported, one killed, one wounded...

Casualty report:- Killed in Action – Working in vicinity of Voormezeele

(Right: A part of the Voormezeele Enclosures 1 & 2, the re-constructed village in the background, wherein are the graves of six-hundred less one of Great War servicemen, many from the early years of the conflict – photograph from 2010)



The son of George Mercer, fisherman, and of Elizabeth Margaret Mercer (née Elliott) – to whom, as of February 1, 1916, he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay – he was also brother to Joseph, Gertrude, Daisy, Lillian and to Myrtle.

Pioneer Mercer was reported as having been *killed in action* while serving with the 2nd Battalion of the Canadian Pioneers in Belgium on April 11, 1916.

Thomas Mercer had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years: date of birth at Little Beaver Cove (later *Port Albert*), Newfoundland, November 5, 1893.

Pioneer Thomas Mercer 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 26, 2023.

