



Captain John Brine (parish records have *Brien*) Mitchell, MC, of the 8th Battalion, London Regiment (*Post Office Rifles*), British Expeditionary Force, is interred in Caterpillar Valley, Longueval – Grave reference XVI.G.15.

In the year 1908, John Brine Mitchell, a student of the Methodist College in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and travelled to England to study geology and forestry at St. John's College, Oxford. In November 1911, having earned both a Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Diploma in Forestry, of that year he returned home to Newfoundland via Montreal, a passenger list simply recording him as a student travelling from England to Newfoundland.

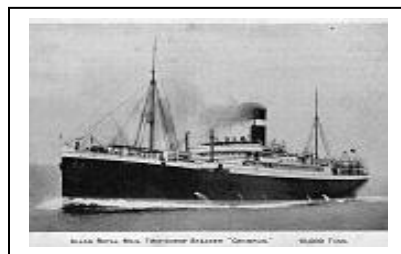


Once home, John Brine Mitchell accepted a position with the recently-arrived Anglo-Newfoundland Development Corporation but apparently within a year he had crossed the North-American continent to work in British Columbia.

The military career of John Brine Mitchell began on November 8 of 1914 in the Canadian city of Vancouver when he presented himself for medical examination, then for enlistment and attestation. The aforesaid medical assessment, however, revealed cardiac problems, thus rather than being attached to a Canadian 'fighting' battalion, he was to serve – at least temporarily – in the ranks of the Canadian Army Service Corps.

Private Mitchell was *taken on strength* by the Second Divisional Train of the Canadian Army Service Corps and was assigned the number 667. However, perhaps for those medical reasons, it appears that the formalities of Private Mitchell's enlistment drew to a conclusion only on January 7 of the following year, 1915, when he was attached to the CASC's Number 8 Company.

On April 18 of 1915 Private Mitchell took passage from Canada for overseas service having travelled across the country to Halifax by train. His Majesty's Transport *Grampian* He and the 2nd Divisional Train embarked on that date onto His Majesty's Transport *Grampian* in the company of the 7th, 8th and 9th Depot Units of Supply, also of the Canadian Army Service Corps, the Field Butchery and also the 18th Battalion of Canadian Infantry.



(Right above: *The image of the Allan Lines steamship 'Grampian' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

Grampian appears to have made the passage in eleven days, a relatively long time for a ship not in convoy, perhaps suggesting a rough passage – or ice. The vessel docked on April 29 in the port of Avonmouth, Bristol, on the western side of England from where Private Mitchell's unit was immediately transported by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*. This at the time was being established on the opposite side of the country, on the Dover Straits in the county of Kent. Just after five o'clock of that April 29, the personnel of the Second Divisional Train were on the march from the local railway station to billets in huts at the subsidiary camp of *West Sandling*.

Shorncliffe was to be a busy place for the succeeding months: the entire Canadian Second Division, some twenty-thousand strong and newly arriving in the United Kingdom, was itself in the process of organization and formation before its despatch to the Continent in the middle of the upcoming September and much of the intervening period was to be spent in training by some, logistical work by others and likely a great deal of planning and bureaucracy by others again.



(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)*

However, it would seem that Private Mitchell already had other things in mind, although no other information than what is to be included here appears to be among his personal files. In a *Supplement* of the *London Gazette* dated September 5, 1915, among literally thousands of appointments of personnel being made at the time, is to be found the following entry: London Regiment – *Private John Brine Mitchell from Canadian Army Service Corps, to be Second Lieutenant.*

At the same time, his Canadian military records, submitted by the lieutenant colonel commanding Private Mitchell's CASC unit, note that: *Struck off Strength* (from the CASC) *4/9/15...Discharged from CEF* (Canadian Expeditionary Force) *having been appointed to a temporary commission in the Imperial Army.*

Apparently by this time his medical insufficiencies had improved enough for him to serve with a regular infantry unit.

**The Canadians referred to the British as Imperials.*

It appears, nonetheless, that the Canadian Army was determined to make the most of Private Mitchell while he was still in its grasp: there was to be no period of leave before he was physically transferred to the British unit; on September 13 he was reported as having been *taken on strength* during the ensuing waiting period by Base Details at the Canadian Army Service Corps Training Depot, this also at *Shorncliffe*.

The London Regiment was a unit of the Territorial Army, this somewhat akin to the Canadian Militia with one important difference: whereas the Militia could not legally be despatched for service outside Canada*, when a recruit joined the British Territorial Army, he specified whether or not he was willing to be despatched for service elsewhere than in the United Kingdom and Ireland**.

**This did not prevent the Militia regiments of Canada recruiting on behalf of the newly-forming Overseas Battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, nor was there to be much restriction of the transformation of a small number of those same regiments directly into units destined for service overseas.*

***Those in the Territorial Army who chose home service when the call up came were placed in home defence and reserve units. Conscription, of course, when it came into force in February of 1916 in the United Kingdom and Ireland, settled the issue.*

At the time of Second Lieutenant Mitchell's transfer to the London Regiment, the unit was in training, many of its personnel having recently returned from duty on the British Mediterranean island-possession of Malta.

The London Regiment, as may be imagined, attracted a large number of recruits; exactly *how many* may be judged by the number of battalions that eventually comprised the unit. It recruited in the early days of the Great War when the so-called Pals' Battalions were to be formed – formations where the men were from the same neighbourhood or place of work or profession – thus the *Post Office Rifles* found in the next paragraph.

The 8th Battalion of the London Regiment came to be known as the *Post Office Rifles*. It was to be so enthusiastically supported that the original single battalion soon became several battalions, all Post Office Rifles and were numbered thus: 1/8th, 2/8th, 3/8th and so on. In the case of Lieutenant Mitchell, however, it has thus far proved impossible to find any designation of his unit other than either 8th or just Post Office Rifles – as on his grave-stone.

Unfortunately, the War Diary entries lapse from the end of August of 1916 until the 1st of January of the New Year, 1917. The only mention of this `absent` period appears to be in two terse statements made at the very end of these records: *Operations in High Wood and beyond, September '16* and *Operations at Butte le Warlencourt, October '16*.

However, the two available pages pertaining to the month of August show that the 8th Battalion of the London Regiment spent most of it in marching. Sore feet perhaps, but the number of casualties for that entire period was recorded as *none*.

From the time when the unit had arrived some sixteen months previously from the United Kingdom – in the French port of Le Havre on March 18 of 1915 – and until the end of July, 1916, the unit had been stationed in northern France to serve at the front in a sector extending more or less from Béthune in the north to Cabaret Rouge in the south, all of this area to the north of the city of Arras. Places such as Festubert and Loos were all to figure in the unit's history.

It was also to serve in an area to become familiar to Canadians: Vimy Ridge. Initially the French were responsible for the military operations there, as cemeteries in the region attest. As the British Army* grew in size it began to relieve French forces; Vimy and its surrounds became a British responsibility and it was thus that in the Spring of 1916, Lieutenant Mitchell found himself at Vimy Ridge attempting – unsuccessfully as had been the French – to dislodge the Germans from the place.

While the Germans were successful in repulsing French and British attacks, they themselves were unable to advance any further, although, of course, the Ridge remained in their possession until April 9, 1917, and the first day of the so-called Battle of Arras.

Lieutenant Mitchell's name was once more found in a *Supplement* of the *London Gazette*, on Page 6299 of the edition dated 24/6/16. On this occasion it announced the awarding of a decoration, the Military Cross – seen below and to the right - as a result of his actions during a counter-attack of May 21, a confrontation for which he was also to be promoted to the rank of captain.

His Majesty, the KING, has been graciously pleased to confer the Military Cross on the undermentioned Officers and Warrant Officers in recognition of their gallantry and devotion to duty in the field.*

2nd Lt. John Brine Mitchell, 8th Bn, R, T.F.

For conspicuous gallantry. After the battalion bombing officer had been wounded he rallied the bombers, led forward a patrol, attacked the enemy, and held them back till our line was consolidated.



(Preceding page: *The Military Cross is granted in recognition of... an act or acts of exemplary gallantry during active operations against the enemy on land... and was awarded to junior officers of the rank of captain or below. It was authorized on December 28, 1914.*)

**As is suggested, a large number of such decorations were to be awarded on this particular occasion.*

Then on July 1, 1916, the British and French attacked further to the south, in the area which was to lend its name to the battle itself – *the Somme*. Such was the number of casualties that re-enforcements were continually necessary. At the end of that month of July it was the turn of the 8th Battalion, London Regiment (*Post Office Rifles*) and Captain John Brine Mitchell.

It had taken Captain Mitchell's unit only three days – from August 20 to 23 until - to march to *the Somme*: it walked from Estrées to Mofflers, from there to Naours, from Naours to Beaucourt, finally to Franvillers - just to the west of the provincial town of Albert. For the following weeks his unit was then engaged in training.

On that September 15 the British and the newly-arrived Canadian Corps undertook a further general offensive. Units of the *Post Office Rifles* were engaged on that day in at least two separate actions: one in the area of the two villages of Flers and Corcelet, both close together and adjacent to the main Albert-Bapaume road; the other perhaps just less than ten kilometres distant to the south-east, at High Wood*.



It was the 47th Division – of which the 8th Battalion of the *Post Office Rifles* was an element - which had been assigned to wrest High Wood from the Germans after several failed attempts.

High Wood fell to the 47th Division on September 18 of that 1916 following three days of intense fighting. Casualties as ever were depressingly high: the *Post Office Rifles* War Diary records that the unit was to count more than three-hundred dead, wounded or missing in action. Eight of its officers were among the dead...

...of whom Captain John Brine Mitchell was one.

(Right above: *High Wood almost a century later – Such is the quantity of unexploded ordnance lying within its bounds that all entrance is still forbidden.* – photograph from 2010)

(Right: *the 47th Division Memorial which stands in the fringes of High Wood* – photograph from 2009(?))



**Still closed to the public in 1915 due the quantity of unexploded ordnance still believed to be lying within its bounds. (On a more personal note, it was at High Wood, at the end of July, 1916, that one of the author's grandfathers was wounded.)*

The son of John Bulley Mitchell, Commission Merchant, and of Anna May Mitchell (née Barnes), she active in the Newfoundland Suffragette Movement, of 1, Devon Row, St. John's, he was also brother to Harold* and to Marguerite.

Captain Mitchell was reported as having been *killed in action* on that September 15, 1916. He died at the age of twenty-seven years: date of birth, June 16, 1889. Contradictory to information from some sources, he was apparently *not* born in France, but in Newfoundland.

**Harold Mitchell (Sergeant, Regimental Number 828) survived the conflict and later became a successful politician.*

Captain John Brine (Brien) Mitchell MC was also 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 – February 18, 2023.



Much of the above information has been garnered from or confirmed by the draft of an article by Suzanne Sexby, at the time Honourary Research Librarian for Memorial University of Newfoundland, the article written for the Newfoundland Quarterly publication.