



Pioneer Martin Murphy (Number 489382) of the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Pozières British Cemetery, Orvillers-La Boisselle: Grave reference IV.P.25..

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

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *sailor*, Martin Murphy 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, perhaps except to note that he grew up in the small Newfoundland west-coast community of Millville, having been one of the last arrivals of thirteen children.

There seems to be no confirmed record of Martin Murphy's departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland or of his arrival in or in the vicinity of Halifax, capital city of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was present there during the first month of the year 1916, for it was there and then that he enlisted.

It was to be on January 6 of 1916 that Martin Murphy presented himself in that city for medical examination, enlistment and attestation. The first-named of these formalities was likely the first to be undergone and the procedure was to...*find him – Fit – for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force.*

Enlistment and attestation then seemingly took place at the same time and Martin Murphy was...*taken on strength...by the 66th Regiment (Princess Louise Fusiliers) of the Canadian Militia. At the same time the swearing of his oath of allegiance was undertaken by a local Justice of the Peace.*

Subsequent to this, the formalities of his enlistment would draw to a conclusion on that same day when a junior officer representing the Lieutenant Colonel commanding the 66th Regiment (*Princess Louise Fusiliers*) declared, on paper, that...*Martin Murphy...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

It was now with the 66th Regiment* – not to be confused with the 66th *Canadian Infantry 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.*

Only three weeks following his enlistment, on that January 22, Private Murphy, 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.

His unit was not to travel alone: according to the CEF Study Group's dossier *a propos troopships*, on the vessel were also the 3rd Divisional Cavalry Squadron; the 3rd Divisional Cyclist Company; 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 Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site. On September 9, 1918, she was torpedoed and sunk with a loss of forty-five lives.*)

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 Murphy's' draft was transported by train to the area of the Dover Straits in the county of Kent, to *Shorncliffe*, at the time in the throes of being transformed into a large Canadian military establishment.

(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*)



Posted there to East Sandling, one of the subsidiary camps of the complex, 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 a detachment of its personnel, Private Murphy among its number, was transferred once more.

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



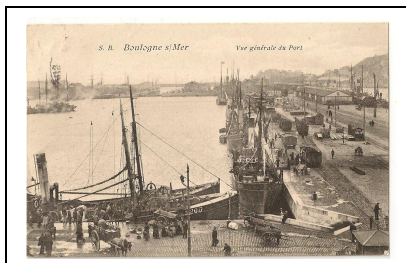
(Right: *Troops marching at a bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp on an uncertain date during the later winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated*)

**It would seem that he was taken on strength - but 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 Murphy passed through nearby Folkestone and then Boulogne on the French coast opposite.*



(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*)

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**.

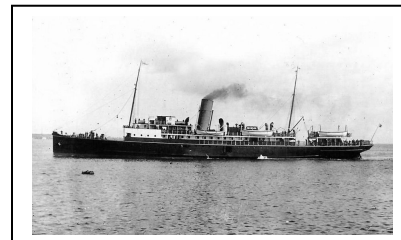


**The above information, while appearing likely to have been the case, has not been yet confirmed for Private Murphy.*

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

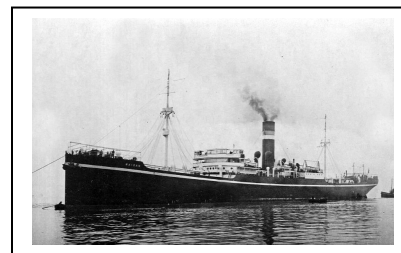
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Meanwhile, on March 7, 1916, the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion had taken ship in the English south-coast port of Southampton: on board the *Caesarea* were to be twenty-two officers and five-hundred fourteen *other ranks*; eight officers and two-hundred forty-eight *other ranks* had travelled on *Maidan*, this vessel also having carried 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* had carried.



(Right above: *The images of Caesarea (top) and Maidan 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.



On the morrow, March 11, a first re-enforcement draft – this one from *Shorncliffe* – arrived to bolster the Battalion's numbers. While not confirmed, it was surely on this day that Pioneer Murphy arrived to report...*to duty...with the unit.*

* * * * *

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 had been attached to the Canadian 2nd Division upon its arrival on the Continent in March 1916 and thus had been 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.*

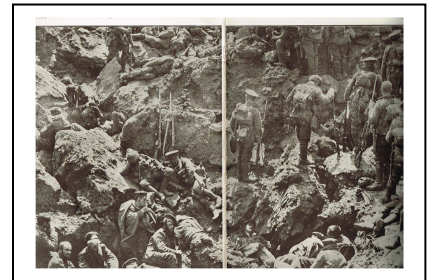
Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction and repairing, and also the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his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



(Right: *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)



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.

(Right above: *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*)

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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 Murphy 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)



A further short extract from the same Battalion War Diary, this entry from April 15, 1916, a month after the unit's arrival in Belgium, may give an idea of the work involved during a typical day for 'C' Company: *Finished the excavation of 7 dugouts, dug the entry trench to the 8th dugout, drained the 9th dugout, filled 2500 sandbags. Filled in the straight trench at the traverse. Returned to camp at 2.30 a.m.*

**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.

(Page following: 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 – from *Illustration*)

Dickebusch is today still a small community to the south-west of the city of Ypres. In 1916, during the time of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion's tenure there, its civilian population had likely been evacuated; certainly little of the village remained standing. In the vicinity of Dickebusch was Camp 'A', in a rear area, but well within the range of German artillery so the War Diarist reports. The Camp became the base for the Battalion from the first days of April until the middle of June when it moved to Micmac Camp which, if not adjacent to, was close enough to Camp 'A' so that work on the same projects was being continued.



Just to the east, from June 2 to 14, 1916, was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which, fortunately, they never exploited.



(Right above: *Remnants of Canadian trenches 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 Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted, perhaps a little too precipitately, by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground.

Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list. However, at least their line still held.

After days of fighting, the detonation of further mines, and horrific gun-fire, the end came on June 13 when the Canadians attacked after having unleashed a ten-hour barrage. Thus they regained the positions which had been lost on the first day of the battle, June 2. And so, as the engagement closed, both sides – apart from a small loss to the Germans in the Hoge Sector – ended up where they had begun: status quo.

And the cemeteries were a little bit fuller.

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

It had been the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division which had borne the brunt of the German onslaught. And although a number of other units had been called forward to serve *in extremis*, the 2nd Pioneer Battalion had not been one of them. It had remained busy constructing defences, drainage ditches, and at least one dressing station in the area of nearby Voormezele during that period and, in fact, continued to do so – and to remain in *Micmac Camp* – until the last week of August.



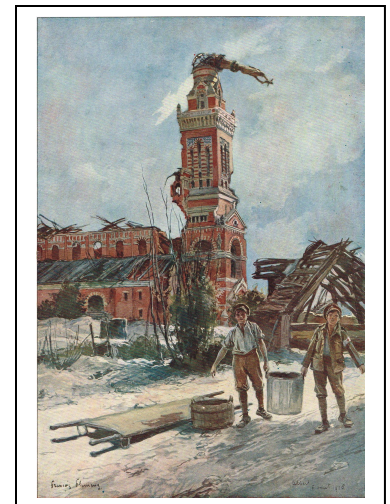
On the 26th day of that month the unit marched to a training area in the vicinity of the northern French commune of Serques, itself some eight kilometres to the north of the larger centre of St-Omer. The training continued until September 4 when, in two separate detachments, the Battalion boarded trains which carried both parties southwards towards the French *Département de la Somme*.

On the following day, September 5, the two detachments, from their respective detraining stations, arrived on foot at Ribeaucourt where... *The inhabitants...did not like the soldiers being with them. They had probably not been well treated by previous bodies of troops.* (2nd Pioneer Battalion War Diary)

The Battalion marched out of Ribeaucourt on the morrow at seven o'clock in the morning. Four of the following five days were to be spent on foot, moving toward the large military Brickfields Camp (*la Briqueterie*) very close to the provincial town of Albert. From there it was but a short distance to the forward area and to the front lines themselves.

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

(Preceding page: *Canadian soldiers at work in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background* – from *Illustration*)



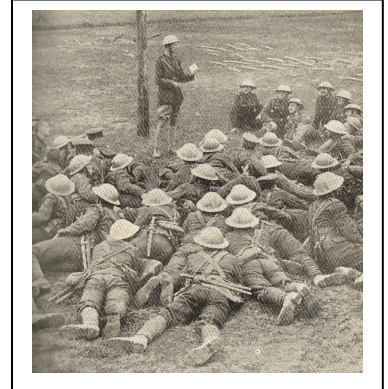
One entry from a Canadian Battalion War Diary – not that of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion – makes mention of first impressions of the town of Albert that the Canadians came to know well: *The town was deserted, as regards its civil population, with the exception of a few who had ventured back to cater to the troops who chanced to be billeted there. The Church, a pleasing structure of pressed red brick and fine building stone, very badly battered by the enemy heavy guns. Surmounting the lofty spire is the figure of the Virgin with the Child in Her arms. This at some time, had received a direct hit at its Base and is now leaning over at an angle of 120 degrees, as if to take a headlong dive to earth.*

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions were to be 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 Newfoundland Regiment which would lose so heavily on that day.

As the battle progressed, other 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 entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first collective contribution was to be in the area of two villages, Flers and Courcellette.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



(Right: *After the fighting of Courcellette (see below), lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)



(Right below: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)



September 15 was the day on which the Canadians attacked in the area of the ruined villages of Flers and of Courcellette, the first major confrontation for the Canadians during 1st Somme. The 2nd Pioneer Battalion was to be in the forward assembly points before zero hour and was to advance with the fighting troops to repair routes, build new strong-points, lay cables, dig new access trenches, lay trench tram-lines, erect marking-posts and, at times, act as stretcher-bearers.

Some of this work, constructed up to the starting-points of September 15, had already been under way by that time. The 2nd Pioneer Battalion then found itself continually employed during the days of the offensive itself and then for the weeks afterwards – all the time attracting the attention of the enemy guns. It was not to be until October 3 that the War Diarist was able to record... *Battalion commenced rest period.*



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

But by that time Pioneer Murphy had played his role to its conclusion.

Entry for September 18, 1916, from the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion War Diary: 89(?) Pnrs (Pioneers), under Lieut. McKay, worked on the new road to COURCELETTE. 75 Pnrs,

under Lieut. Smith, work extending McGHIE TRENCH to COURCELETTE. Both these parties were driven from their work owing to heavy shelling.

The son of James Murphy, carpenter, and of Caroline Murphy (née *Jennings**, deceased June 6, 1904) he was also brother to twelve siblings: Paul, Julia, Agnes, John-Patrick, Daniel-Joseph, Elizabeth, Elizabeth-Ann, Evelyn, James-Edmond, Mary-Jane, Suzanne and to Thomas.

**The couple was married on August 7, 1872.*

Pioneer Murphy was reported as having been...*killed in action*...on September 18, 1916, in fighting during...*First Somme*.

Martin Murphy had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty years: date of birth in Codroy River, Newfoundland, March 19, 1895 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Pioneer Martin Murphy was entitled 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 28, 2023.



