



Private William Robert Newell, Number 163888 of the 1st Company of the Canadian Machine-Gun Corps, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery: Grave reference XXII.CC.11.

(Right: The image of the badge of the Canadian Machine Gun Corps is from the canadiansoldiers.com Web-site.)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, William Robert Newell's marriage certificate documents him as already residing permanently in the city of Toronto as early as May 1 of 1901. There appears to be little if any other confirmed information a propos his life previous to that or afterwards until the day of his marriage.

Matilda Carter was a widow when she married William Robert Newell on February 17, 1911, in the city of Toronto. A boarding-house keeper – where she met him? - she was also more than twenty years senior to her new husband. The couple was then to live at 26, Thompson Street in Toronto.

Private Newell's first pay records – confirmed by an entry on his medical report – record him as having enlisted on August 10, 1915, and as having thereupon been attached to the 109th Regiment of the Canadian Militia. The attachment was to be of short duration.

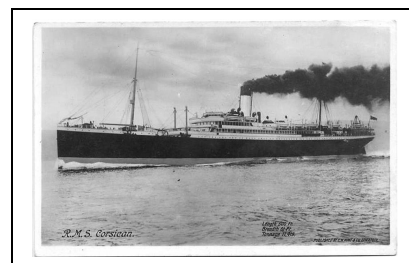
The Canadian Militia had been organized primarily for the defence of the nation and, by law, its units were interdicted from operating outside the frontiers of the country. However, this was not to prevent those same units from enlisting recruits who would then be subsequently transferred to - and *taken on strength* by - the new *Overseas Battalions* which had started organizing since the outbreak of hostilities in Europe.

Whether Private Newell underwent any training with the 109th Regiment is not recorded among his papers. However it was to be only twenty-three days after his enlistment, on September 2 in the town of Niagara, that he attested, underwent the afore-mentioned medical examination, and was *taken on strength* by the 84th *Overseas Battalion* of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

The formalities of enlistment were brought to a formal conclusion two days afterwards, on September 4, when J.G. Wright – no rank is documented and he appears not to have been an officer of either the 109th Regiment or of the 84th Battalion – declared, on paper, that... *William Robert Newell, having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

It was to be only some three weeks later that Private Newell found himself on board ship and travelling overseas. The (1st) Canadian Division during the months of April, May and June of 1915 had been involved in costly confrontations with the German Army at Ypres, Festubert and at Givenchy-en-Gohelle. Replacements for the losses were necessary, some of which could be supplied by formations already in the United Kingdom, but more were now immediately required from back home.

Thus it was that on September 25, re-enforcement drafts from four Canadian Infantry Battalions, the 68th, 78th, 83rd and Private Newell's 84th were boarding His Majesty's Transport *Corsican*, a requisitioned ship of the *Allan Line*, in the harbour at Montréal. The infantry was not to travel alone: also taking trans-Atlantic passage on *Corsican* was *A Section* of the 2nd Canadian Field Ambulance whose personnel were to provide medical services during the voyage*.



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(Preceding page: *The image of a pre-war Royal Mail Ship Corsican is from the bing.com/images website. In 1923 Corsican was wrecked off Fine Point, on the rocky coast of Newfoundland, but all four-hundred thirty-seven on board were saved.*)

**It was not until June 18 of the following year that the parent unit of the 84th Battalion left Canada for overseas service. Once having arrived in the United Kingdom it was to be used only as a source of re-enforcement and was never to serve as a unit on the Continent. The Battalion was disbanded in April of 1918.*

The crossing to England took some ten days; two usually reliable sources appear to disagree on the date of disembarkation, one citing October 4, the other October 6 as being the day on which the vessel dropped anchor in the English south-coast port of Plymouth-Devonport. On whichever day it was, it appears that Private Newell's Draft was thereupon transported to West Sandling Camp in the county of Kent.



(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*)

(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*)



That camp at West Sandling was one of a number of such subsidiaries which comprised the ensemble of the large Canadian military complex of Shorncliffe.

Already in existence before the Canadians took charge, it was situated on the Dover Straits and just south of the harbour and town of Folkestone. Thus the great majority of troops despatched to the Continent from Shorncliffe were to pass through Folkestone and then via its French counterpart, Boulogne, on the coast almost opposite and some two hours' sailing-time distant.



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

Immediately upon arrival at West Sandling, the draft from the 84th Battalion had been transferred to another unit, the 36th Battalion of Canadian Infantry*. One of Private Newell's first acts while in service with his new unit was to go *absent without leave* on or about October 10 (16?). There appear to be no further details available except that the misdemeanour cost him day's pay – one dollar... plus the extra ten cents standard Field Allowance.

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**The 36th Battalion was to suffer the same fate as the 84th Battalion: it also eventually existed only to provide re-enforcements for other Canadian units and it also was disbanded before the end of the war, in September of 1917.*

No further reports – neither negative nor positive - appear in the file of Private Newell until the first month of the New Year, 1916. On January 5 he is documented as having been taken on strength by the 1st Infantry Brigade Machine Gun Company, and then as a Transport Driver for that unit on the next day again.*

**On the other hand, his pay records note this change only as of February 29 of that year – 1916 was a leap year.*

That January 6 was also the day on which Private Newell crossed the English Channel on his way to France, thereupon reporting to the Canadian Base Depot which by that time had been established in the vicinity of the French port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. The primary function of the Depot was to receive incoming personnel from the United Kingdom and to despatch them to their new units when and where the unit was prepared to welcome them.



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

Private Newell was despatched of January 10 and reported to his unit three days later, on January 13. He was likely one of the fifty *other ranks* recorded by the Company War Diarist as having arrived on the next day again, January 14, at a time when the unit was stationed in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, at Mont des Cats.

* * * * *

The story of the machine-gun during the Great War is one where, although it had a reasonably happy ending, the way forward since the beginning of the conflict appears to have been fraught with frustration and missed opportunity due to the usual bureaucratic and political reasons. And while it is fair to note that the Allies at times used their machine-guns in ways and manners different from those of their adversaries, what is interesting is the number of times that the War Diarists of Canadian battalions recognize that the German use of the weapon was at times almost alone in swaying the outcome of a confrontation – and if not changing it, at least delaying the inevitable, usually at a heavy price to the Canadian attackers*.

**Particularly noticeable during the final four months of the conflict.*

The War Diary of the 1st (Canadian) Infantry Brigade Machine Gun Company begins of January 14 of 1916, likely the day on which Private Newell reported *to duty* at Mont des Cats, Belgium. Two other such companies were organized at the same time, to serve with the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Brigades, all three Brigades being elements of the Canadian 1st Division – and all three were at the time employed in the *Ploegsteert Sector* on the Franco-Belgian frontier, it then being the Canadian 1st Division's responsibility*.

Right: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, Ploegsteert Sector, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014)*

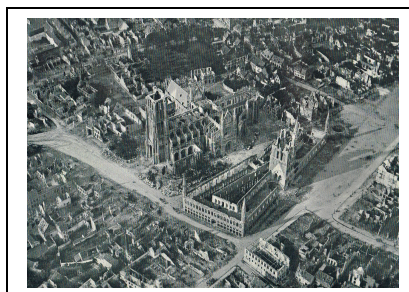


**Companies were also organized at the time to serve with the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions, although for several months, those of the 3rd Division had no guns. The 4th Division, arriving on the Continent in August of 1916, brought its own companies – Canadian - from the United Kingdom.*

The infantry battalions, of course, had their own machine-guns, the one increasingly in favour being the light, two-man, Lewis Gun. The newly-formed brigade companies had heavier weapons – in weight, not in calibre - and were soon to be equipped with the ever-so-dependable Vickers medium gun (see below) which – one of its advantages - fired the same calibre small-arms ammunition as did the Lewis Gun and the Lee-Enfield rifle in the trenches.

* * * * *

The 1st Brigade MG Company and Private Newell remained in the area of Mont des Cats and then nearby Kemmel until almost the end of March, during this period undergoing training and becoming more and more involved with the use of the weapon in war-time situations. On April 1, in conjunction with the 1st Brigade, it moved into the area of Dickebusch, just to the south of the shattered city of Ypres.



This was a sector of the *Ypres Salient*, one of the most lethal theatres of the entire *Great War*.

(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)*

During the first half of April the Company War Diarist on a single occasion saw fit to note the... *Violent artillery duels, fierce fighting at St. Eloi*. But the altercation there was a British, Canadian 2nd Division and, of course, German affair, and the personnel of the 1st Division were to be bothered by little more than the noise of the guns.

During Both April and May, the War Diary entry for the day oft-times read simply: *Nothing of importance to report...* or something of that ilk. All that, however, was to change six weeks later.

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 *Hooge, 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*.

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(Right: Remnants of Canadian trenches – the iron-work reconstituted - dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010)



(Right below: 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 able to patch up their defences.

But the hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, June 3, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, proved to be a costly disaster for the Canadians.

(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 hold the line. This was also true at the very end of the confrontation when troops from particularly the Canadian 1st Division were employed in the final attack of June 12-13.



The Company War Diary entry for June 13 confirms the Canadian 1st Division involvement: *After an intense bombardment battalions in 1st Division attacked and captured our old trenches. Reports received are very vague.*

(Right above: 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 all 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)

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But while infantry battalions from the Canadian 1st Division had been fighting at *Mount Sorrel*, the 1st Brigade Machine Gun Company and Private Newell had *not*: the unit had been sent forward to Ypres in reserve on June 14, only after the infantry altercation had drawn to its close. Once at Ypres, just a heavy enemy artillery bombardment and a church parade were to disturb the routines of the next few days.

Up until that month of June, Private Newell's Company had been using the American-made Colt machine-guns. It had been the weapon of choice for the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the first two years of the Great War, but the conditions of modern warfare had begun to demand more than the Colt was able to offer. Its relatively low rate of fire and its inability to provide continuous fire over extended periods saw it superseded by the British-produced Vickers gun, reliable enough for it still to be in service some fifty years later.

On June 26 the Company received... *16 Vickers guns with all their equipment...* and on the following day a training course began for officers and men alike – in fact, for every man in the Company – six to eight being the number required for a single gun-crew.

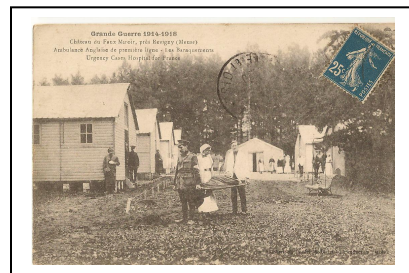


(Right: *Canadian Machine-gun troops becoming acquainted with their recently-acquired British-built Vickers machine-guns – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

According once again to the Company War Diary, almost six hours per day were devoted to this training which seems to have continued on until the end of the month of July. At this time the guns began to be employed in *active service*, although deficiencies with their transport were causing problems: *Owing to presence of mangle the transport are under strength. Their strength is now 9 riding horses, 31 draught horses and 6 mules. Our request for a G. S. (General Service) wagon was refused. 9 limbers have been built up but we are unable to carry all our equipment. This necessitates making double trips or borrowing other G. S. wagons**. (Excerpt from Company War Diary entry of July 31, 1916)

**It is to be remembered that Private Newell was a driver with the transport section.*

In the meantime, Private Newell had been elsewhere: On June 16 he had been attached for an unspecified reason to the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade Head-Quarters for only a single day. Then on July 5 he had been admitted into the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance at Wippenhoek for observation – his papers perhaps suggest the reason to be psychiatric – but nothing more seems to have ever come of it and even the date of his return *to duty* seems not to have been recorded.



(Right above: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

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On August 9 the 1st Canadian Machine Gun Company of the 1st Canadian Division withdrew from the area of Ypres: in fact had been ordered away from Belgium entirely and on that day, in uncomfortably hot weather – and in the company of the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade – it marched westward for eight miles (some thirteen kilometres) to cross the border into France, there to spend the night in the area of the community of Steenvoorde.

Two more days of marching were to follow before Private Newell's Company reached its billets – *splendid billets* records the War Diarist – at Nordausques in the vicinity of which the 1st Canadian Division was about to undergo sixteen days of intense training... *in open warfare**

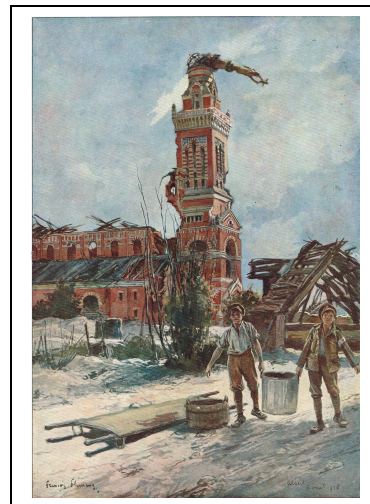
**The Company War Diarist documents that on one day... The Brigade carried out a practice attack today on plans which have been successful in "SOMME" fighting... Historians of that battle might have had their doubts about that claim.*

Apart from the above-mentioned practice attack, 1st Canadian MG Company underwent exercises in myriad disciplines: semaphore signalling; range finding; street fighting; scouting; fighting in woods; defence of bridges; indirect fire; gas... Yet while there is no reason to believe that Private Newell did not participate in any or all the above, there appears to have been little of direct relevance to a soldier of the transport section – particularly one reliant on animal horse-power – unless route marches fall into that category.

The train which was to carry the Company to its destiny at *the Somme* pulled out of the station at Audruicq at twenty-seven minutes past nine on the evening of Sunday, August 27. Travelling via the coastal towns of Calais and Boulogne, the Company arrived at its detraining point of Auxi-le-Château at half-past five on the following morning. Three days later again, by a combination of motorized transport and marching, not only Private Newell's Company but the entire 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade reached its billets in the provincial town of Albert.

On the next day, August 31... *Relieved machine guns of 7th and 12th Australian Brigades this afternoon on POZIERES front.*

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



The 1st *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 had 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 Beaumont-Hamel.

As the battle had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were 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 offensive contribution was to be on September 15 in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

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

For the 1st Canadian M G Company, however, the fighting at *the Somme* was to begin immediately, not on September 15. It commenced on September 1 with the support of the 2nd Australian Brigade in their positions, and then supporting their attack on *Mouquet Farm* two days later. The Australians had then been relieved by Canadian troops of the 1st Division, the guns of the Company contributing to the continued assault on the *Farm* and to the rebuff of a subsequent German counter-attack.



The Company had then been withdrawn to billets in Albert on September 10 but the period of rest was to be short.

(Right and right below: *A post-War image of what was left of Pozières – the monument receding into the mist still stands - as is shown in the photograph immediately below – in commemoration of the sacrifice of the Australian troops fighting at the Somme in 1916. – above from a vintage post-card; colour from 2016*)



As of the very next morning the entire Brigade began to march. It was not to be involved in the upcoming offensive – for the Canadians to be at Flers-Courcelette - which was planned for four days hence, thus it was likely ordered on its way in order to free up billets for those incoming troops who were. Private Newell and his comrades-in-arms thus marched for six days – via Bouzincourt, Senlis, Warloy, Vadencourt, Tottencourt, Puchevillers, Val de Maison, Ferme de Rosel, La Vicogne, Vadencourt - before his unit returned to the *Brickfields Camp* at Albert. It remained there but a single day.



By the night of September 17-18 the 1st Canadian MG Company was back in the forward area, in immediate support in the sector to the north and east of the village of Courcelette. The tour was to be about as uneventful as tours during the period of 1st Somme were wont to be, German artillery and his snipers still making life – and death - a misery. Relieved on the night of the 24th-25th, the Private Newell's unit was being billeted late that same night, again in Albert.

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During the period of that tour there had occurred a further British-led attack which, by the time of the 1st Canadian MG Company's withdrawal, had run its costly course. The unit had been only peripherally involved.

A second prolonged route march was now in the offing for Private Newell's unit and for the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade – and for the same reasons as on the prior occasion. Setting out on September 25, the troops followed much the itinerary of the previous trek of two weeks before – Warloy, La Vicogne, Halloy – where the unit spent five days undergoing instruction and training, an inspection by the Canadian General Currie and a bathing parade. Val de Maison, LaVicogne and Vadencourt now followed, before Albert and its...*very good accommodation...* was reached on October 4.

During Private Newell's absence a further two offensives had gone ahead and concluded: 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**, for which the entire Canadian Corps of, by now, four divisions, was to act as the Reserve Army.

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

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



Two sections of the 1st Canadian MG Company moved up into support and reserve positions on October 5, the Company's two other sections into reserve on the next day. An offensive was to take place on October 8.

(Excerpt from 1st Canadian MG Company War Diary for October 8, 1916) *...Fire was opened at 4.50 am, a steady barrage was maintained until 6.30 am... ...at 2.50 am...saw Germans assembling in rear of their lost trench and opened fire with four guns. At 3.03...ordered a steady barrage behind captured German trench. This fir was maintained until 4.30 pm. At 5.00 pm O.C. 4th Battalion requested a barrage in front of his lines. A slow barrage was then kept up until 8.00 pm.*



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

On the morrow the Company moved back into Albert: on the day following, October 10, it began to march away from the 1st *Battle of the Somme*, the first stage being made on foot to the community of Bouzincourt.

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Most if not all of the Canadian units upon their withdrawal from *the Somme* used a similar itinerary. Starting out to the westward or north-westward, they were to circle around to the west of Arras and beyond, to the sectors lying in-between that city and the northern French town of Béthune.



(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*)

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



These sectors comprised many communities of the coal-mining belt centred upon the city of Lens. They for obvious reasons were of prime importance to both the French and British Allies as well as to the invading Germans.

By October 24 Private Newell's Company was had moved into Divisional Reserve in the vicinity of Gouy-Servins and Villers-au-Bois, two communities that, while behind the lines, were both in proximity to a long crest of German-occupied territory that dominated the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.



(Right: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017*)

A month later, while he was serving in the *Vimy Sector*, it appears as though the Company authorities deemed that Private Newell by now deserved a short ten-day period of leave – allowing for travel-time it in fact amounted to twelve days. He was absent from his unit from November 26 until December 8 inclusive, although whether he was to savour the delights of the British capital or of the French one – or elsewhere – during that time is not to be found among his papers.

Indirect fire by machine guns targeted such things as the enemy's dumps and his different lines of communication. It was to become a common practice as the war progressed and it developed into the machine-gun barrage where hundreds of thousands of rounds* were fired for days on end to render the adversary's routine way of life untenable.

**Its huge expenditure of ammunition is, of course, the Achilles heel of an automatic weapon. The Vickers fires up to five-hundred rounds per minutes and at times the weapons were in almost constant use, the only stoppages being to change a belt or a barrel. The Company's War Diary often cites an expenditure of fourteen- to fifteen-thousand cartridges – and someone had to carry them up to the gun.*

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Indirect fire was to become an everyday – in fact often at night - event to be entered in the War Diary during this autumn of 1916 and the winter that followed. Apart from the routine infantry patrolling and the occasional raid carried out on a greater or lesser scale there was little else to report of a belligerent nature – except the stream of wounded, caused by artillery or snipers, and which the flow of sick and of dental patients usually outnumbered.

From October until January 15 the 1st Canadian M G Company was to remain in the area of Vimy Ridge. It then moved some dozen kilometres north to the mining-centre and centre of Lens. But daily routines appear to have been the same and the daily count of some twelve-thousand rounds to be discharged in the enemy's direction seems not to have changed*.

**It did on February 13 when the Company fired some thirty-nine thousand rounds in support of a raid undertaken on that day by the 10th Brigade, and again on March 1 when forty-two thousand rounds were expended for the same reason.*

During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.



Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets – from Illustration)

The same seems not to apply for the machine-gun companies. Perhaps because for the most part they did not operate in the front-line trenches and therefore incurred many fewer casualties, longer periods were spent in the support and forward reserve areas and any relief was often done by sections of which there were normally four to a company: the 1st Canadian MG Company, for example, as a unit, apparently spent seven weeks forward without any reprieve from January 15 until March 5.

After having then spent five days, until March 10, to transfer – with training en route – to Estrée-Cauchy, Private Newell's unit was now to undergo kit and equipment inspections before further exercises commenced. Among these preparations were to be some novel developments: use of enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

Not all of this pertained to machine-gun companies which would not be advancing as infantry, but range-finding, map-reading and use of a compass, and use of that indirect fire – now to become a barrage – were the subjects of frequent lessons.

At the end of March the Company moved to the rear area of Écoivres. At that time the Company's guns began firing on previously selected targets in conjunction with the artillery barrage which had already begun. With a maximum range of just over four kilometres it was not necessary that the guns and their gunners always be close to the forward area. On April 8, however, the Company moved forward to an... *assembly area, 6 men to a crew. 1 Officer, 1 Sergeant and 1 Corporal per section.* It was now to support the infantry.

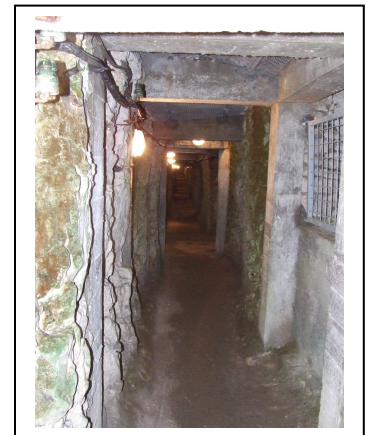
On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive not only at *Vimy Ridge*, but also in a large area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields of the previous year; this was the *Battle of Arras*, intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the count of casualties, some four 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 was an overall disappointment, the French offensive proved to be a 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.



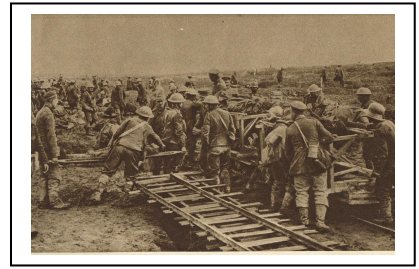
**In fact there was a British Brigade operating under Canadian command.*

The attack on *Vimy Ridge* took 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 April 9 and 10, and the realities of life in the trenches took hold once more. That early success was not to be repeated – with, perhaps, one exception at *Cambrai* - 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 to which had been allotted the task of clearing the slope in the area of the once-village of Thélus.



The 1st Canadian Division and that British brigade were operating yet to the right again, further south down the slope where it sweeps past the village of Roclincourt and towards the city of Arras.

(Right above: *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*)



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

Excerpt from the Canadian MG Company War Diary entry of April 9, 1917: *A & C Sections barrage guns put up barrage for capture of final objective. – they advanced by slow and easy stages until they reached their positions. “B” Section with one gun of “D” Section went up in rear of attacking Battalions and placed their guns in front of main resistance line. Also the remaining three guns of “D” Section were placed in rear of main resistance line. Shelling not very heavy, but a great deal of sniping...*



(Right: *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*)

The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days and by the end of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

By the beginning of June, much of the Canadian Corps had been transferred back to sectors just to the north of the recent fighting, sectors from the area of Neuville St-Vaast as far north as Béthune in which they had been serving prior to the *Battle of Arras*. The 1st Canadian MG Company itself, however, had remained for much of the month of June in the area of *Vimy Ridge* and nearby *Acheville* where during that tour there was usually... *nothing of importance to report.*

After the efforts of that campaign, units were being reinforced, re-organized and, at times, playing baseball.

This relative calm was to last until the middle of August by which time the Company had for the best part of a month been posted some kilometres north-west to the area of the mining community of Mazingarbe.

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

The Canadians were to be major contributors to this effort.

(Right: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



(Right: *Canadian troops in the Lens Sector advancing under shell-fire across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear. Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)



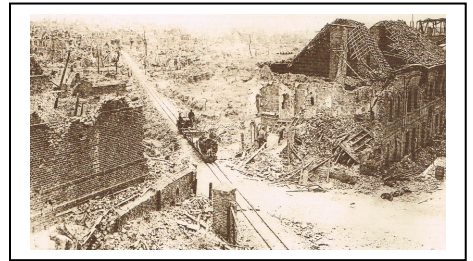
It was the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions to which were to be handed the responsibility for the capture of the place and, to that end... *three Sections went back into the line tonight taking up their barrage positions in Loos area for expected show.* (Excerpt from 1st Canadian MG Company entry of August 13, 1917)

(continued)

The following day was entirely spent by the Company in Chalk Pit... *moving to Barrage positions in Gun Trench at 10.00 P.M...* and the entries for the four days of the operation itself are just as brief: *August 15 opened fire for attack at 4.25 A.M. fired all day no casualties... August 16 Responded to several S.O.S.s on our left firing several barrages... August 17 Several counter attacks A B & C Sections moved up into the front line. Enemy sent over a heavy gas bombardment in Loos... August 18 3 OR's were wounded while in the front line. "A" Section moved from Gun Trench to Reserve Trench...*

The Canadian-led operations in the Lens-Béthune Sector had still been incomplete towards the end of August when the British High Command decided to cancel any further actions there other than defensive ones*. Things were not going altogether as planned in that summer campaign further north and the British were short of men. The Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians were to be called upon to remedy that shortage.

The unit retired on August 22 back to Mazingarbe and on August 30 further back to the area of Divion. From there a week later again, it was transferred to Lievin, a suburb to the west of the city of Lens. Training and sport occupied the Company's time before the transfer to Lievin when it appears to be the activities of the German artillery which held the War Diarist's attention for most of the remainder of the month of September.



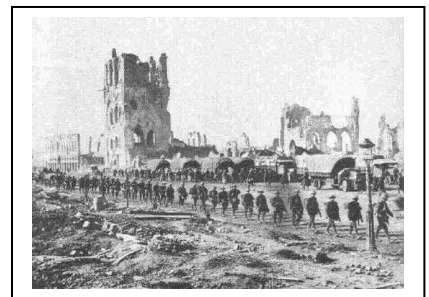
(Right above: *The city and mining-centre of Lens much as it was when the Canadians left it for the fields of Passchendaele in October of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

Private Newell's dossier at this point note that on September 30 he was attached to the #2 Company of the Divisional Train as a brakeman. However, the extent of this secondment is not recorded, nor are any other details such as when he returned to his unit.

It was not until the final weeks of October that the Canadians were to become embroiled in the offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – at least ostensibly - one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right below: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

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



(continued)

(Right: An unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration)



In mid-October the 1st Canadian MG Company began to move northwards in stages. On October 12 it undertook an almost-three-hour march to Hersin-Coupigny where it remained for eight days of training. On October 20 it moved on foot to Divion, thence to the area of l'Eclème on October 22.

By the following day again the unit had moved once more, to Hondegheem, north of the larger centre of Hazebrouck, stopping there for a week for further training and instruction and waiting while its officers and NCOs travelled to the Belgian town of Poperinghe to view large relief maps of the battle area.

On the final day of October, two Sections of the Company with their equipment moved into the area of Ypres – being bombed on the way - to “X” Camp, close to the community of St-Jean to the north-eastern outskirts of the city. From there they were sent some distance forward – along with 175,000 rounds of ammunition - to act as Local Defence*.

**Since the War Diarist is by this time often noting the presence of hostile aeroplanes, the Local Defence guns were likely used as anti-aircraft measures.*

The two other Sections followed from Hondegheem a day later, to remain close to “X” Camp where they were the recipients of a number of well-placed gas shells, one of which penetrated the pill-box occupied by members of the Staff. Nine Company personnel were temporarily blinded at the time.

For the next number of days the unit and the Camp were subject to the attentions of enemy bombers and also his artillery, although the casualty count was relatively light. By October 5 it had been decided that six of the total of sixteen guns would be moved forward, to advance during an infantry attack to be undertaken by the 1st Battalion.



(Right above: The Canadian Memorial which today stands on Passchendaele Ridge – photograph from 2015)

It was at this juncture that Private Newell was wounded: Casualty report – *While on sentry duty at his gun, during operations at Passchendaele, he was severely wounded in the head by shrapnel from an enemy shell. He was taken to No. 3 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station, where he died.*

In fact, it appears to have been a little more complicated than that: Private Newell was at first taken to the 1st Canadian Field Ambulance situated to the west of Ypres* at Vlamertingue. Since it is recorded that he was admitted into the 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on November 7 – one of two-hundred seven casualties admitted on that day – the facility by then established at the Rémy Sidings south-west of Poperinghe, it is likely that he was wounded on or about November 6.

**There is a suggestion that he also passed through the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance at Wippenhoek while en route to the 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station.*

The following excerpt from the Company War Diary of November 6. Perhaps of no relevance whatsoever, it just *may* describe the episode in which Private Newell was wounded: *The guns and crews in the jumping off trench were not in the shelled area but unluckily one shell landed on a gun smashing the gun and tripod & killing the crew. Casualties 3 O.R.s killed 1 wounded.* – There is nothing in the War Diary which corresponds exactly to the casualty report.

The following is copied from a Field Medical Card issued by the 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station following an operation. The date of the procedure has not been conclusively recorded but – and these may or may not have been added later – the report of the operation (see below) is concluded by the letters R.I.P.:

SW (shot/shrapnel-wound) – Rt. Parietal region Hemiplegia (partial paralysis)

Local anæsthesia – Wd. (wound) excised. Flap turned down. Wd. in skull enlarged & fragments of bone removed & much broken loose(?) brain tissue. Wd Closed & ?????? brain (drain?). R.I.P.

J.A. Gunn

Caveat: Some of the following information – *that in italics* - needs to be confirmed.

The son of George Newell, fisherman, and Annie (*Mary Ann, Maria*) Newell (née Daw), of *Burnt Head*, Brigus, Newfoundland - to whom he had allocated a monthly fifteen (as of September 15, 1915) or twenty dollars (as of December 1, 1915)* - he was also *brother to Elizabeth-Ann, to Emma-Patience, to George and to Minnie.*

**Both payments are recorded as continuing until the time of Private Newell's death – except that he did not earn that much in a month. According to other files, fifteen dollars is the more likely payment.*

Private Newell was reported as having *died of wounds* by the officer commanding the 3rd Canadian Casualty Station at the Rémy Sidings, Belgium, on November 9 of 1917.

William Robert Newell had enlisted at the apparent age of thirty-four years: date of birth at *Burnt Head*, Brigus, *November 7, 1881* (this date from Burnt Head Parish Records – only the year 1881 is cited on his attestation papers).

Private William Robert Newell was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 26, 2023.

