



Private Patrick O'Brien, Number 1060253 of the 85 Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Dury Mill British Cemetery: Grave reference I.A.16.

(Right: The 85th Battalion emblem, worn as a head-dress cap badge, is from the Wikipedia web-site)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *seaman*, Patrick O'Brien appears to have left little behind him a propos his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia and to its capital city, Halifax. All that may be added with any certainty is that he was there, in Halifax, during some of the month of December, 1916, for that is where and when he enlisted.

While certain papers record the date as December 12, his first pay records indicate that it was on the day before, December 11, 1916, that the Canadian Army began to remunerate the by-then Private O'Brien for his services. They also confirm that it was on the same December 11 that he was *taken on strength* by the 246th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) which in his files is classified as having been a reserve battalion of the Nova Scotia Regiment.

It was then on December 12 that Private O'Brien underwent a medical examination which pronounced him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force*...and his attestation.

Twenty-five days following, on January 6 of the New Year, 1917, the commanding officer of the 246th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Norval Henry Parsons, brought the formalities of Private O'Brien's enlistment to a conclusion when he declared – on paper – that...*Pat O'Brien...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private O'Brien now had five months to wait before travelling to service overseas. Although information is sparse, it is likely that much of his training during the interim was at first undertaken in the Halifax Armoury before the weather later permitted it to continue on the adjacent Halifax Common.

It was from the harbour in Halifax that a draft of the 246th Battalion sailed for the United Kingdom on March 25, 1917, on board His Majesty's Transport *Metagama*, to be followed eleven weeks later by Private O'Brien and the main body of the Battalion. The unit was not to take passage alone: having embarked onto HMT *Olympic* on May 31, it was joined by the 1st Draft of the 11th Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 122nd, 207th, 217th, 243rd, 252nd, 254th and 255th Battalions of Canadian Infantry* as well as drafts of the 191st, 230th and 232nd Battalions.

The last of these boarded *Olympic* on June 2, the vessel then sailing later that same day.

(Right: *HMT Olympic* – sister ship of *Britannic*, sunk by a mine in the Mediterranean Sea in November of 1915, and of the ill-starred *Titanic* - on the right, lies at anchor along with *HM Hospital Ship Aquitania*, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the *Imperial War Museum, London*)



**These were surely under-strength battalions as, even though she was one of the world's largest passenger ships, Olympic would not have been able to transport the ten-thousand or so personnel that full-strength battalions and the other units would have represented.*

After an uneventful voyage, the ship docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on June 9. Two days later, on June 11, the 246th Battalion was recorded as having reported to the large Canadian military establishment of *Camp Bramshott* in the southern English county of Hampshire whereupon it was placed in the segregation camp for a period of ten days as a precaution against any imported disease.

On the same June 11 the new-comers of the 246th Battalion were also transferred – on this occasion on paper – to the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) at not-far-distant *Witley Camp* on southern Surrey to continue its training*. It was a posting that was to last until the following February although the date on which the unit was physically transferred to *Witley Camp* after segregation at *Camp Bramshott* appears not to have been recorded.

**By that time, the 185th Battalion was a component of the 5th Canadian Division, a reserve formation that remained in the United Kingdom during the latter part of the Great War to serve for training and also as a reinforcement pool.*

By the time of the 246th Battalion's arrival at *Camp Bramshott*, Private O'Brien had received a promotion: he is documented as having disembarked from *Olympic* with the rank of lance corporal. However, the appointment was of short duration: on that same June 11, he reverted to the status of private soldier – possibly because his unit, the 18th Battalion, already had a full complement of non-commissioned officers.



(Right above: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

From *Witley* and the 185th Battalion, on February 23 of the New Year, 1918, Private O'Brien was *struck off strength* to be then *taken on strength* by the 17th Reserve Battalion back at *Camp Bramshott*. This was perhaps one of the first indications of his impending movement to *active service* on the Continent.

This came about just less than six weeks later on April 4 when he was now posted – again on paper - to the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) which was already serving on the *Western Front*. He left England on that same day – likely via the south-coast port of Southampton and the French industrial city of Le Havre, situated on the estuary of the River Seine. By the close of the following day he had reported to the 4th Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the vicinity of the coastal town of Étapes and been officially *taken on strength* by his new unit.



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

Two days afterwards, Private O'Brien was on his way again, now to the nearby Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp. There he was to stay for thirty-three days before being despatched to the 85th Battalion on May 10. He reported *to duty* with the Battalion on that same day.

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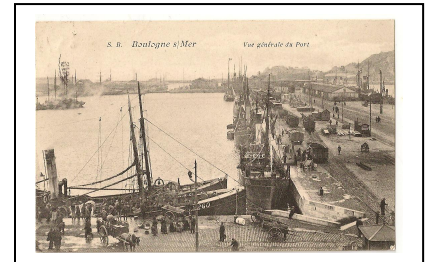
The 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) had been organized in Canada in late 1915. The unit had taken passage to the United Kingdom in October of the following year – also travelling on *Olympic* – and had been despatched to France in February of 1917 to be a future element of the 4th Canadian Division which had itself disembarked in France some months earlier, in August of 1916.

The Battalion, having been stationed at Witley, had passed through the English-Channel port of Folkestone on February 10 to embark onto His majesty's Transport *London* for passage to the Continent. The Battalion had disembarked at noon that day in the French port of Boulogne, to march to the nearby *St. Martin's Rest Camp*.



By February 14 it had travelled inland to report to Gouy-Servins where it had remained until the second day of March.

(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)

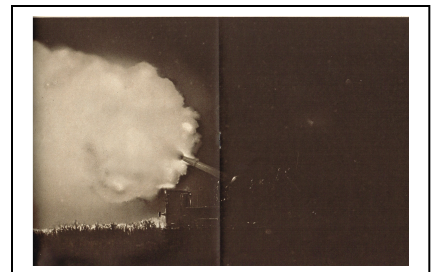


(Right: An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

A goodly number of sources at this point in the 85th Battalion's history appear to err, often by *omission* it must be said, rather than by *commission* - the author pleads guilty of having originally made the same mistake: While these sources record the Nova Scotia unit as being with the 12th Brigade of the 4th Division, this omits the fact – confirmed by the 11th Brigade War Diary – that it was as an element of this *latter* formation (see immediately below) that the 85th Brigade served until after the action of April 9 at *Vimy Ridge*:

Excerpt from 11th Brigade... *Operational Order No. 51 issued at 11.15 a.m., 12.IV.17 – On relief the 85th Bn will pass to command of G.O.C. 12th Brigade...*

It appears that the 85th Battalion as an entity moved forward to the front line for the first time only on April 8. It apparently had been officially originally designated as a *working unit*, to be employed in reserve. However, due to its commanding officer's insistence, it had been undergoing exercises for several weeks before training on prepared sites at *Bouvigny Huts...in meticulous fashion...*and its officers being briefed on the upcoming operation.



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

This insistence by the unit's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Borden, and all those preparations, were to stand the 85th Battalion in good stead for what was to follow.

What followed, of course, was to be the Canadian attack of April 9, 1917 on *Vimy Ridge*, an operation in which the 85th Battalion was to play a conspicuous role late in the afternoon.

However, prior to this as yet unforeseen event, the tasks of the 85th Battalion on that day had been ordered as follows: *Construction and filling Dump at Strong Points 5 and 6; Construction of deep dug-out...; Digging C(ommunication) T(rench) from front Assembly Trench...; Party to carry wire and assist Brigade wiring party on construction...; Party to carry forward ammunition for Stokes Guns; Prisoners of War Escort Party; Battle Police...*

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *First Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



The British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment: the French offensive was to be a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood atop Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

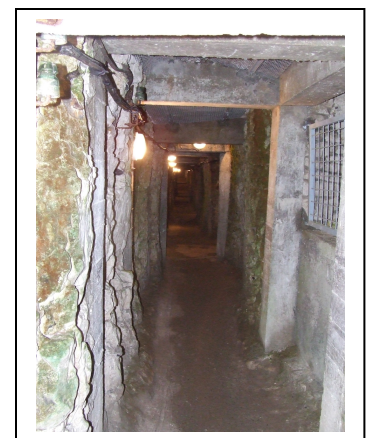


(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)

On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, 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.

Several kilometres of tunnel had been hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines of *Vimy Ridge*, underground accesses which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack.

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



(continued)

As seen, the 85th Battalion had not been assigned a place in the initial assault but had been designated as a reserve force. However, the caprices of war were about to play a role in the unit's history: At three o'clock on the afternoon of April 9, the C.O. of the 85th battalion had been ordered to despatch two of his four Companies, one to each of the 87th and 102nd Battalions whose assault was being jeopardized by the enemy from positions on top of the crest. He was also ordered to be in position with the remainder of his command, at half-past four, in two of those well-known tunnels, there to await further orders.

Those orders had arrived thirty minutes early: *BATTER trench...is strongly held by fresh enemy... Will attack it with 2 companies of 85th...*

4.15 p.m. – G.O.C. (General Officer Commanding) *arranges assault on BATTER...by 85th Battalion...*

6.30 p.m. – *85th Battalion attacked without a barrage, and reached their objectives without much opposition.*

(Excerpts from the 85th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)



(Right above: *The battle-field of Vimy Ridge on April 10, two unidentified fallen in the fore-ground – from Illustration*)

Apparently the objectives in question were known collectively as *Hill 145* which, once taken, was thereupon consolidated into a strong-point by the 85th Battalion.

Today the Canadian National Memorial stands atop that same *Hill 145*.



(Right above: *A part of Vimy Ridge and the Canadian National Memorial as seen from La Chaudière in what was on April 9, 1917, German-occupied territory – photograph from 1915*)

On the days following, the 85th Battalion had been involved in a general advance, but there was not to be the same success as on April 9. On April 13 the 11th Brigade had been relieved and the 85th Battalion moved back to the *Bouvigny Huts* where it had been quartered in March. From this time forward, until the end of the *Great War*, having earned its place with the capture of *Hill 145*, it was to serve as a component of the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade.

By April 18 the Battalion had moved from the *Bouvigny Huts* to not-so-distant La Targette (also referred to as *Aux Reitz*). There it found that it was to replace the 73rd Battalion which would be disbanded on or about April 16. Two days later, on April 18, the War Diarist of the 85th Battalion made the following entry in his journal: *Transport of 73rd Bn. transferred to this unit.* On the next day again he added: *More...personnel of 73rd transferred to this unit.*

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(Right: *French and British Commonwealth dead lie in cemeteries at La Targette. – photograph from 2014*)



The unit was not to enjoy its respite for long. On April 21 the 85th Battalion moved from La Targette to *Canada Camp* at Chateau de la Haie; there, on the following day, it was ordered to form part of a composite Canadian brigade which was to support a British attack. The unit was ...*to be ready to move forward on half hours notice any time after 6 a.m. 23/4/17.*

The Battalion was left...*standing to...*all that April 23 and presumably then all night before it moved forward at eleven o'clock on the next morning. The move was not completed until three o'clock in the morning of the next day again, April 25, when it found itself in positions fronting the Lens to Vimy railway line.



(Right above: *Canadian troops under fire in the Lens Sector of the front during the spring or summer of 1917 – from Illustration*)

By that time, plans had apparently changed: for the remainder of that day - and the next - the unit spent most of its time digging a new front-line trench. A few spare hours were spent in simulating an attack on the German positions opposite in order to divert the enemy's attention from the adjacent sector where the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions were going to put in a real attack on April 28. For its troubles on that April 26, the 85th Battalion received much unwelcome artillery attention which resulted in a number of casualties.

This exercise in deception was repeated on April 28 before the unit retired into support positions on the following day, to an area where it remained until May 2 when it moved forward once more. On May 6 the Battalion was withdrawn entirely from the forward area into reserve.

During that four-day tour the 85th Battalion had not been involved in any infantry action but it had not been inactive – the Battalion War Diary records:

Work done during tour:- BADDECK TRENCH was completed – GRENADIER TRENCH was deepened – HALIFAX TRENCH improved – Block advanced – BORDEN TRENCH deepened and completed across the whole front. Casualties during tour – from 2nd the 6th inclusive – 2 OFFICERS and 20 Other Ranks

The following days and weeks were to be spent in much the same manner: back and forth from reserve to the front-line trenches with time spent in-between the two in support. Casualties were relatively light, almost all caused by enemy gun-fire. When not in the firing-line the Battalion personnel supplied man-power for working-parties and carrying-parties.



And the weather for the most part was apparently ...*fine and warm.*

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(Preceding page: A Canadian carrying-party loading up before moving up to the forward area, one of the many tasks allocated to troops when they were not manning the front lines: The use of the head-band - the 'tump'- was adopted from the North American indigenous peoples. – from *Le Miroir*)

Thus it was, in early May of 1917 that the role of the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) in the *First Battle of Arras* sputtered to its close.

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



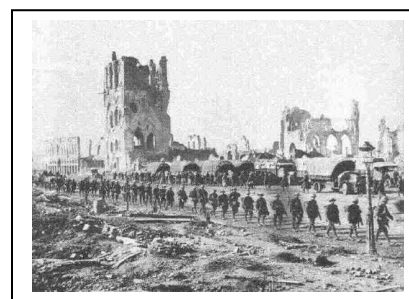
(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing under fire in the Lens Sector during the late summer of 1917 – from *Illustration* or *Le Miroir)**

The Canadians would be a major contributor to this effort, the best-documented action of which was to be the confrontation fought at *Hill 70* by troops of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions. However, troops of the 4th Canadian Division – and thus the 85th Battalion - were not to be involved in this operation.



(Right above: *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. This successful operation showed the progress that had been recently made, particularly in artillery tactics. – photograph from 1914*)

The Canadians apparently had expected, and had planned, further action in the area, but to the north the ongoing *Third Battle of Ypres* was not proceeding according to expectations and the British were running out of re-enforcements. The Canadians – and the Anzacs - were to be ordered to provide the necessary man-power.



(Right: *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)**

While not having been heavily involved in the Canadian-led summer campaign of 1917 in the mining area of the *Lens-Béthune* Sectors, the 85th Battalion was slated to play its part in that other ongoing offensive, the one in Belgium, and once again in the *Ypres Salient* – a battle that has come to symbolize the wretchedness of war.

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Officially designated 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 – *ostensibly* - one of the British Army's objectives.

(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. During the week of October 26 until November 3 it was 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 – November 10 - the reverse was true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

(Right below: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

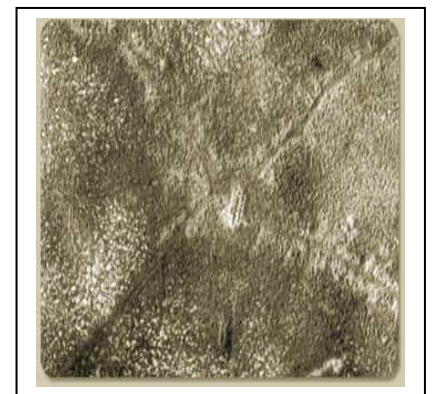
The 85th Battalion had been in action during the final two days of October and had incurred more than fifty per cent casualties among both officers and *other ranks*: a total of six-hundred eighty-eight went into action; three-hundred ninety-four had become casualties. The unit was shattered.

The 85th Battalion was thereupon withdrawn to the south from *Passchendaele* in the first week of November, 1917, and was once more back in France, in the area of Lens, and enduring the glamour of life in the trenches.

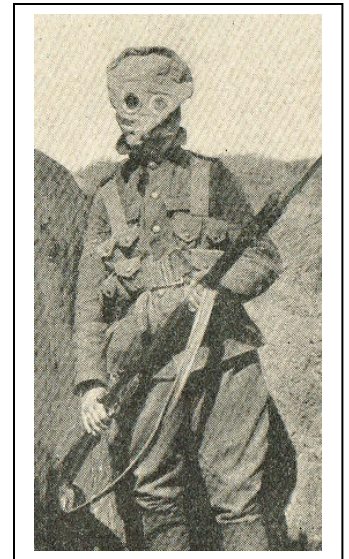
(Right below: *The monument to the 85th Battalion (Nova Scotia Highlanders) which stands in a field by the side of the road from Zonnebeke to Passendale (Passchendaele) – photograph from 2014*)

By November 20, the 85th Battalion had withdrawn to the area of the commune of Raimbert, not far removed from the larger northern centre of Béthune. The time spent there behind the lines was to comprise the usual training, competitions, sports, lectures, church-parades, musketry, gas-drills, inspections, concerts, re-enforcements, working-parties... the list in the Battalion War Diary *does* go on... but the Diarist has omitted *one* event.

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(Right below: A photograph, from 1917, of a Canadian soldier during training in the use of his 'gas-helmet': As may be imagined, it was difficult for the wearer to perform the duties of a soldier, particularly in the event of an attack. – from *Le Miroir*)



The month of December offered something a little different – and a reminder of home - to all the Canadian military formations and units which were serving overseas at the time: the Canadian General Election. Polls for the Army were open from December 4 until 17, and participation, in at least some units, was to be in the ninety per cent range*.

**Apparently, at the same time, the troops were given the opportunity to subscribe to Canada's Victory War Loan. Thus the soldier fighting the war was also encouraged to pay for it as well.*

The winter of 1917-1918 was for the most part a quiet period, much as had been the three previous winters of the *Great War*. The 85th Battalion War Diary suggests little offensive activity on the part of the unit and the number of casualties recorded per diem are few.

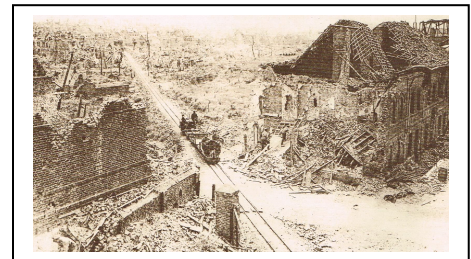
When it served in the front line and in support positions, the 85th Battalion was ordered into such sectors as Méricourt and Lens; when withdrawn into reserve – which it appears to have been for much of that winter – it was posted to Château de la Haie, Souchez, Petit Servins and to Raimbert.

(Right: *The village of Souchez in 1915, before the arrival of the British and Canadians in the sector – from Le Miroir*)



On March 13 the 85th Battalion was ordered forward into support positions in the Cité St-Pierre, one of the mining districts encompassing the city of Lens. On March 18 the unit moved up into the front line where it was still serving on the 21st, the first day of spring, 1918.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens, the sector where the 85th Battalion was serving, in March of 1918, but they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)



Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the enemy then launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the former battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops serving there.

The impressive German advance continued for a month, but petered out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

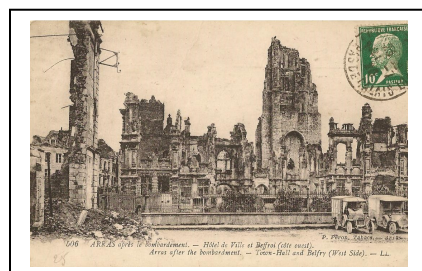
**A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but was finally held by the end of the month.*

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Belgian Flanders during 'Georgette' in mid-April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



At first there had been a great deal of indecision displayed by the Canadian High Command and units were being transferred, often in a circular fashion, with orders given before soon afterwards being countermanded.

The *supposed* object of these exercises had been two-fold: to relieve and release British troops to fight further south; and to secure the area of Arras which appeared to be – and which later *proved* to be – the northern limit of the German offensive. However, it also produced a great deal of unnecessary confusion.



Thus the 85th Battalion found itself towards the end of March ordered into *the Neuville St-Vaast Sector* and in the area of St-Éloi, just north of Arras.

(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its venerable bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four full years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right and right below: *The village of Mont St-Éloi, adjacent to Écoivres, at an early period of the Great War and again a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – partly destroyed in 1793 and further again in the war – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



Towards the end of that April a relative calm descended on the front lines as the German threat faded – the offensive had won for the enemy a great deal of ground, but nothing of any real military significance in either of the two theatres of operation. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides had been exhausted and needed time to once more reorganize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.



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The Allies, from the point of view of available re-enforcements, were even so by now a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were now belatedly arriving on the scene. An overall Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive.

Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right below: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site)

If the front was quiet during the months of May, June and July – the everyday patrols and the occasional raid notwithstanding – the 85th Battalion until July 25 was in any case not in any position to know. It seems to have spent eighty-one consecutive days at various places in the rear area – Monchy-Breton, Valhoun, Lozinghem and Écoivres – in training and the like. It was not to be until July 25 that it relieved the 72nd Canadian Infantry Battalion in the front line, *Fampoux Sector*, just north-east of Arras.



But it was of course during that period, on May 10, that Private O'Brien had *reported to duty* with the 85th Battalion.

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(Right and right below: *Écoivres Military Cemetery seen at the time of - or just after – the Great War, and as it is a century later – from a vintage post-card and (colour) from 1915*)

Only six days after that July 25th move to the forward area, the 85th Battalion was on the move once more, having been relieved on July 31 in turn by a British battalion... *Proceeded by light railway to billets at AUBIN. The whole Corps is moving in a few days – in fact has started now. For where – no one knows but it looks like a big scrap ahead...* (Excerpt from 85th Battalion entry for July 31, 1918)



On the morrow, August 1, the 85th Battalion War Diarist's entry for the day continues as follows: *Fine. Word received regarding probable move by the whole Canadian Corps with a rumour of operations to follow. Nothing definite as to whether North or South*. Preparations being made for a quick move, as it has to be done on the Battalions (sic) own wheels.*



**It was to be south. However, several Canadian units were to be sent in the opposite direction, north, into Belgium with orders to make themselves as conspicuous as possible in order to give the impression of a major operation soon to be undertaken in that area.*

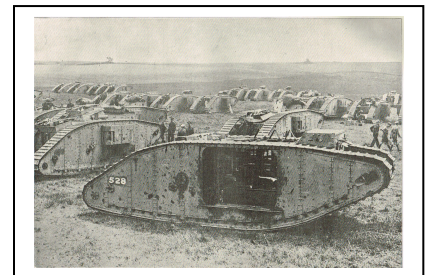
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That August 8, a week after the 85th Battalion's departure from the area of Arras, would be the opening day of the Allied offensive, the greater part on this occasion British-, Commonwealth- and French-led, which in conjunction with other advances, was to result in the Armistice of November 11.

On the Allied side this succession of battles became known to history as *the Hundred Days – Les Cent Jours*: what the Germans called it is less certain, although August 8 was to be, as far as Ludendorff – the German commander - was concerned, *the Black Day of the German Army (Der Schwartz Tag)*.

Just days before that August 8, the 85th Battalion had travelled south-west by train to disembark at Hangest-sur-Somme – about half-way between Abbéville and Amiens – and from there had marched some twenty-five kilometres westward to the smaller community of Vergies.

(Right: *Tanks in ever-increasing numbers were to be used by the Allies in the last battles of the Great War. In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'. Many of the troops to be involved in the fighting from this time onwards underwent training in the company of tanks. – from Illustration*)



This movement had taken place on August 3 and 4 by which time the Battalion War Diarist had become apprised of the reason for all this activity: *The scheme will be known as the L.C. (Llandovery (sic) Castle) Operation, and will take place in a very few days, on a front of from 20 to 30 miles, East of Amiens, to a depth in places of eight miles. The show will be staged by the 3rd British Corps, Australians, Canadian Corps, and the 3rd French Army, all under Field Marshal, Sir Douglas Haig. The principal objective of the operation, to relieve the pressure on AMIENS.*

(Right: *The historic gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – photograph from 2007(?)*)



At nine o'clock on the evening of August 4, the Battalion had begun another long march of about twenty-eight kilometres to the eastward, to Briquemesnil, where it arrived at five in the morning of the 5th.

Two days later again there had been a further overnight... *hard march...*to the *Bois de Boves*, some nine kilometres to the south of Amiens. Yet another trek that night – August 7-8 – was to bring Private O'Brien's Battalion to its assembly point in the *Bois de Gentelles (Gentelles Wood)* from where the Battalion attack of August 8 was to be launched on the following morning.

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Whereas the first part of the transfer had been accomplished mostly by train and by motor transport, the second part had been done by night marches, and had passed around to the west and then to the south of Amiens to keep the movement from the eyes of any German aviation observers. It worked: the Germans were totally taken by surprise.

Thus the assault was to prove an overwhelming success, with territorial gains rarely seen since the opening weeks of the war in 1914. The 85th Battalion continued in its advance until August 18 when the unit was relieved and ordered withdrawn into Divisional Reserve – yet still, it would seem, within artillery range.

(Right: *August 8: captured positions on the Somme being consolidated by Canadian troops against a German counter-attack – from Le Miroir*)



The Battalion War Diarist reported twenty-seven killed and one-hundred fifteen wounded for the entire month of August – still too many, to be sure, but far from those appalling figures of *Passchendaele*.

(Right: *In one of the many villages liberated from the Germans, Canadian and enemy wounded await evacuation to the rear. – from Le Miroir*)



The 85th Battalion was not to return to the forward area until the night of August 31-September 1 when the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade was despatched to the front line.

But the forward area to which it was sent was no longer the *Amiens Front*. By that time, and in just as much secrecy as three weeks prior, the entire Canadian Corps had been transported, by many of the same itineraries, back whence it had come and, by then, it was already positioned on the new *Arras Front* and ready to deliver a further attack.

A first offensive in this area to the east of Arras had already been launched by the Canadians and British during the final days of August. On September 2, other units - including Private O'Brien's 85th Battalion - passed to the offensive, attacking the trenches of the Drocourt-Quéant Line, advancing along the axis of the Arras-Cambrai road as far as, and then capturing, Dury village.

(Right: *Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon. – photograph from 2015*)



Excerpts from the 85th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) War Diary Appendices pertinent to the offensive operations of September 2, 1918:

(continued)

...The task allotted to the 85th C.I. Battalion, NOVA SCOTIA HIGHLANDERS, was to break through the DROCOURT-QUEANT Line and DROCOURT-QUEANT Support Line...

...The Battalion plan of operations was that there be six waves of two lines each...the first two waves of "D" and "A" Companies...whose objective was...(a part of)...the DROCOURT-QUEANT 4th Line system (1st day objective)...the 3rd and 4th waves, made up of "C" Company, allotted the task of cleaning up the area between the 1st objective...and support lines...and to capture and consolidate the latter. The 5th and 6th waves made up of "B" Company, were to leapfrog "C" Company and capture...the Sunken Road...*

***Unfortunately, in which Company Private O'Brien was serving appears not to have been documented.**

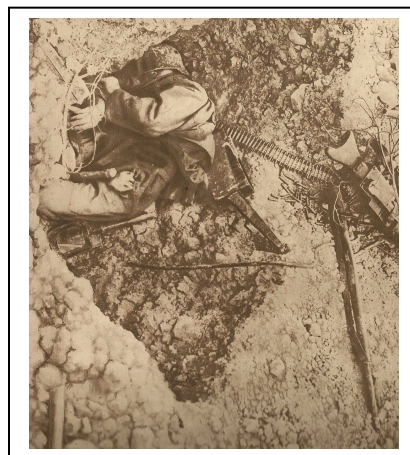
Account of the Action:- At zero hour, 5.00 a.m., the Battalion jumped off as ordered, but as no Tanks had, up to that time, appeared of our Battalion frontage, "A" and "D" Companies cleared the area, which was held by a strong machine gun post, between the jump-off and the barrage line... These posts...were untouched by our artillery fire.

In passing over the first 300 yards of our advance the Battalion losses amounted to approximately 50% of our total casualties throughout the whole action... However, in spite of heavy opposition from numerous machine-guns, with the arrival of the tanks, the first objective was reported as having been taken by a quarter past six that morning.



(Right above: Douglas Haig, C.-in-C. of British and Commonwealth forces on the Western Front inspects Canadian troops after their successful operation of September 2 against the German Drocourt-Quéant Line – from Le Miroir)

The second objective was to fall at seven-thirty, seventy-five minutes later. ...Particularly heavy direct and indirect machine-gun fire was here encountered, both from the flanks and from our direct front... The Bosche had established strong machine gun posts both in the Mill* and its immediate vicinity, as well as along the Sunken Road...



(Right: A German machine-gunner who also gave his all – from Illustration)

The heavy enfilade fire became so intense that the attacking wave suffered heavy casualties... They pushed forward, assaulted and carried the final objective and established outposts... A heavy barrage from the enemy artillery was laid down on the final objective, causing considerable casualties, but no counter attack developed.

This line was held by the 85th Battalion until relieved by the troops of the 11th C.I. Brigade at 11.30 a.m., when the 85th Battalion was drawn back into their first objective, into Brigade Reserve...

****The losses in these final campaigns were among the heaviest of the war: of the three-hundred thirty-seven dead interred in Dury Mill British Cemetery, only nine did not serve in a Canadian unit, and all but eighteen were to die on September 2 of 1918.***

Circumstances of Casualty:- While taking part in an attack south of Haucourt to South of Dury at about 9 A.M. on September 2nd 1918, he was hit in the head by an enemy rifle bullet and instantly killed.

The son of James O'Brien, fisherman – to whom in a will dated January 10, 1917, he had bequeathed his all, and to whom as of June 1 of 1917, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay - and of Mary O'Brien (née Collins) of South-East Placentia, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Anastasia-Mary, to Michael, John-Thomas, Michael-Joseph, Edward, Albert-Alphonsus and to Lawrence.

Private O'Brien was reported as having been *killed in action* on September 2, 1918, in fighting near the village of Dury.

Patrick O'Brien had enlisted at the *apparent* age of eighteen years and six months: date of birth in South-East Placentia, Newfoundland, June 21, 1898 (from attestation papers). However, Placentia Parish Records document the date as June 21, 1897.



(Right: *The War Memorial in Placentia honours the sacrifice of Patrick O'Brien.* – photograph from 2014)

Private Patrick O'Brien 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 25, 2023.