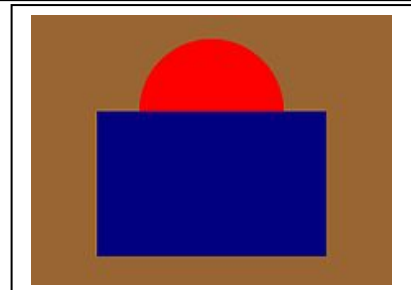




Private James Neil O'Reilly (*ORILEY* in the Canadian Archives) (Number 469426) of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference H. 33.

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Victoria Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a



*miner*, James Neil O'Reilly had been a resident of New Waterford for much of the time since his emigration from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia in 1910. He had crossed the Cabot Strait on board the SS *Bruce* from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on October 18 of that year, accompanied by his mother, Ellen, and siblings Ruth, Bridget and Joseph. Ellen O'Reilly recorded on the ship's passenger list that they were on their way to join her husband, Thomas, and their son, Frederick, in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney.

By the time of the 1911 Census, the family was living in New Waterford where Thomas - and likely also his older son - had found employment as a miner. Thomas and Frederick had left Newfoundland in the year 1906.

According to his earliest pay records, Neil O'Reilly – the *James* was apparently dropped early on – was first remunerated for his service to the Canadian Army on August 11 of 1915 and, on the same day, was *taken on strength* by the newly-formed 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*The Princess Louise Fusiliers*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

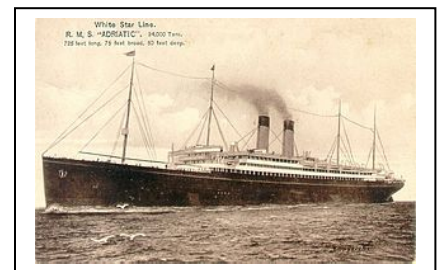
Nine days later, on August 20 while still in Sydney, the now-Private O'Reilly underwent a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. Four days later again he was attested and the formalities of his enlistment brought to a close when the officer commanding the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Montgomery Campbell declared – on paper – that...*Niel (sic) O'Riley...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Although partially recruited in Halifax, Nova Scotia, it appears that the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to train in the province of New Brunswick. Camp Sussex, already established in King's County – in 1885 - before the onset of the *Great War*, was to be the site for Private O'Reilly's unit to complete its preparations for overseas service, as well as the Battalion's Headquarters. When exactly he was posted there is not to be found in his dossier, but it was to be more than seven months between the time of his enlistment and his departure from Canada in the spring of 1916.

In the meantime, Private O'Reilly appears to have been in need of dental surgery as at the end of February and during much of March, 1916, the drill that he saw was used by the dentist rather than ordered by the sergeant-major. On February 29 – 1916 was a leap-year – he had sixteen teeth extracted and from March 24 to 28 he had two more taken out, as well as a full upper plate fitted.

Hardly had this final procedure been concluded before Private O'Reilly was journeying to Halifax. There on March 31 the thirty-eight officers and one-thousand eighty-eight other ranks of his Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Adriatic* for the trans-Atlantic crossing.

(Right: *The image of the White Star Liner Adriatic is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)



The unit was not to take passage alone to the United Kingdom: also on board ship were to be the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry, the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance and a draft of the Coburg Heavy Battery – for a total of twenty-four hundred thirty-seven passengers.

*Adriatic* sailed on April 1, then docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool eight days later, on April 9. To which Canadian military establishment the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion was then transported is not clear. All that may be said with any certainty is that it was to serve only as a reserve pool and that by July of 1916, only three months after having arrived in the United Kingdom, its personnel had been absorbed by other Canadian units\*.

*\*Before the end of the Great War, Canada was to have despatched overseas two-hundred fifty battalions – although it is true that a number of these units, particularly as the conflict progressed, were below full strength. At the outset, these Overseas Battalions all had presumptions of seeing active service in a theatre of war.*

*However, as it transpired, only some fifty of these formations were ever to be sent across the English Channel to the Western Front. By far the majority remained in the United Kingdom to be used as re-enforcement pools and they were gradually absorbed, particularly after January of 1917, by units that had by then been designated as Canadian Reserve Battalions.*

In the case of Private O'Reilly, for bureaucratic reasons he was transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup> Reserve Infantry Battalion of the CEF for four days when, on June 24, 1916, he was *struck off strength* by the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion and *taken on strength* by that second-named battalion on the same day. This reserve unit was at the time stationed at – or in the vicinity of – the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, on the Dover Straits and in close proximity to the harbour and town of Folkestone.



(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*)

This sort of short-term transfer was to occur on many thousands of occasions during the *Great War* when Canadian re-enforcements were in transit from England to the Continent to their new units which were already serving on the *Western Front*. Such was the case of Private O'Reilly.

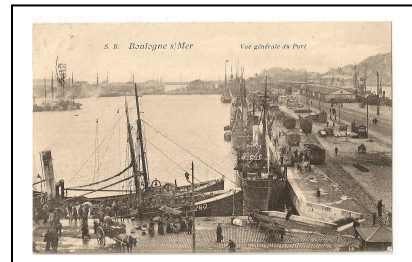


(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)

On June 28, having once again been transferred – on this occasion on paper – to the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*), at that time serving in Belgium, he crossed from Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite and some two hours' sailing-time distant.

From Boulogne he was despatched south to the Canadian Base Depot established at Rouelles, in the area of the industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine. He was apparently one of more than four thousand to report there from England at that time.

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



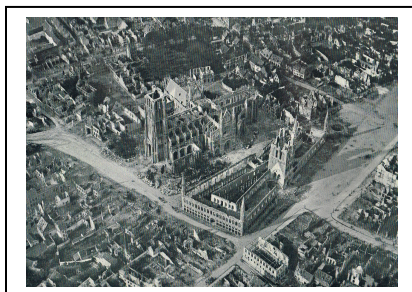
Private O'Reilly was to spend some thirteen days at Le Havre before he was then ordered northward on July 12 to join the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. He was reported as having done so two days later, on July 14.

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



\* \* \* \* \*

A component of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) was a Montreal-based unit with a history which dated back to 1862. After mobilization it had sailed to Great Britain from Canada in May of 1915, and had been transferred with the Division to France, then to the *Kingdom of Belgium*, in September of the same year. There it was to serve with the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade to the south of the *Ypres Salient* in a sector between the already battered city of Ypres and the Franco-Belgian border.



(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*)

It was not to be until early April of 1916, more than six months following its arrival on the Continent that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation. It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of March, 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 then capitalize on 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, had greeted the Canadian newcomers who were to begin to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4.

(continued)



Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had by then inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

(Preceding page: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

The *Action of the St. Eloi Craters* had not been a happy experience for the novice Canadians. The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, however, according to its War Diary, had not been heavily involved and the majority of its casualties at the time had been due to artillery fire. Apart from repelling a German bombing party on April 15, the unit was to be engaged in very little of the infantry action.

Six weeks following the episode at St-Éloi there had then been the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*. This had involved mainly the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division\* but many other units, since the situation at times was to become critical, had subsequently played a role.

*\*The Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division officially came into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. However, unlike its two predecessors, it was formed on the Continent, some of its units having already been on active service there for months while others did not arrive from England until the end of the winter. Thus it was not until March of that year that the Division was capable of assuming responsibility for any sector. When it eventually did, it was thrust into the south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This was in a sector to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Railway Dugouts*, *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*.



(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun 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 had been allowed the time to patch up their defences. Sir Julien Byng's\* hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal, poorly supported by artillery and poorly co-ordinated, was to be a horrific experience for the Canadians.



*\*The British-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps.*

(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-east of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914*)

(continued)

The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to play a leading part in the action at *Mount Sorrel*. Uninvolved during the early days, the unit had been ordered moved forward into the front-line trenches in the area of *Maple Copse* on June 7, there to remain until relieved on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Thus neither was it to participate in the closing stages of June 12-13.

The Battalion was not to escape without casualties however. Once again these had been caused mostly by German gunfire, particularly at the time when it was moving forward towards *Maple Copse* on June 7, one platoon having incurred twenty-three casualties in a single extremely heavy bombardment and thus had almost ceased to exist.

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



(Right: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014*)



From the time of its withdrawal from the area of *Mount Sorrel* until the final week of August the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion had passed the early summer submitting to the rigours, routines and perils of life in - and out of - the trenches\*. Often the war diaries of this period refer to *quiet days...front quieter than normal* – although, of course, everything is relative. After the exertions of *Mount Sorrel*, any infantry activity was to be on a local level, limited to patrols and raids, and most casualties had been due to artillery and to sniping.

(Right: *A century later, reminders of a violent past at the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, the area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014*)



*\*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 and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)**

It was, of course, during this summer period of 1916, more exactly at a time when the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion was in the rear area near Dickebusch and supplying working-parties for a number of tasks – burying cables, digging trenches and carrying supplies - that Private O'Reilly reported *to duty* with his new unit on July 14\*.

*\*His arrival is reported on Private O'Reilly's Active Service Form but not by the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary either on or about that particular date.*

\* \* \* \* \*

On August 26 Private Stevens' Battalion withdrew westward, entirely away from the Ypres Salient and the forward area, through the French border town of Steenvoorde, Éperlecques in north-western France, where new training grounds had been established. It arrived there on August 28 and began to train on the following day.

Further to the south, the British summer offensive was not progressing as well as planned and losses had been heavy: help in the form of troops from the Commonwealth was already being ordered by the High Command, thus the Canadian Corps' transfer to the area of Éperlecques. Apparently, the first item on the Battalion's agenda immediately upon its arrival at the site was to acquire new rifles\*.

**(Right: Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photographs of the real thing – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from The War Illustrated)**



*\*The Canadian-produced Ross rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it jammed, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*

*By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a rifle that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.*

By that 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 the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

(continued)

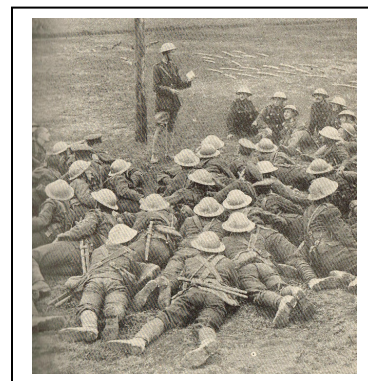
(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

On that first day of *First Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.



As the battle had 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 the New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on or about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

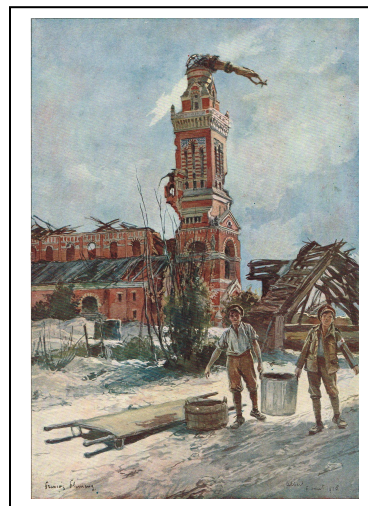
(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916. – from *The War Illustrated**)



Meanwhile, on September 4, ten days after its retirement from Belgium, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion had left its billets at Eperlecques and marched to the railway station at Arques. There it boarded a train for the journey to Conteville, just over one-hundred kilometres distant, arriving at its destination at five-thirty on the following morning.

Later on during that same September 5, the Battalion started to march once more, to arrive some five days later at the large military encampment at the *Brickfields (La Briquetterie)*, in the proximity of the provincial town of Albert. There it was to remain, providing working- and wiring-parties, until midnight of September 14 when it moved forward to positions in the *Chalk Pits* for the attack of the morrow.

During the first two days of that offensive the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion was as much involved as was any other Canadian Battalion – it just was not shooting or bombing anyone. It was, however, carrying small-arms ammunition and bombs (*grenades*) to the forward areas for others to use, as well as Bengal Lights, flares, stretchers, rations...



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

(continued)



On September 17, the unit was ordered to deliver an attack on the German front line, an assault which began at five-thirty in the afternoon. The operation was to bear mixed results – and heavy casualties - and the War Diarist wrote the following scathing paragraph in his entry of that day: *With regard to this attack, if the Artillery preparation had been in any way adequate, there is no doubt but that the objective would have been obtained along the whole line. As it was, a barrage was put up approximately 500 yards in rear of the German front line, which merely served to warn the enemy that an attack would probably be launched, and they were able when our men advanced, to stand up on their parapets and shoot them down.*

By the 18<sup>th</sup> the Battalion was back at *Brickfields Camp*: the unit's total casualties during the preceding days, of *all ranks*, had been three-hundred twenty.

(Right: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)



On September 28, the unit was back in the line once more, on this occasion having been ordered to make an attack on the so-called enemy *Regina Trench* system. The attack was one of several to fail and *Regina Trench* was not to be taken definitively until November 11, six weeks later. The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion's operation had cost a further two-hundred four casualties all told.

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



(Right: *Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it, finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)



On October 2, the remnants of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) had begun its withdrawal from the *First Battle of the Somme*. It had marched westward before turning northward, passing in a semi-circular fashion behind the city of Arras.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras which had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916. – from Illustration*)



It had then continued in the direction of the mining centre of Lens, to be stationed in the suburbs, in the *Angres Sector*.

The late autumn of that 1916 – after the *First Battle of the Somme* - and the winter of 1916-1917 was to be a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce and to re-organize.

(continued)

There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday routine patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.

There was of course, the constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers. However, it was mostly sickness and dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period.

As for the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion itself, it was to remain in the *Angres Sector* from October 15 of 1916 until January 17 of the New Year, 1917. The unit had then been posted to - and billeted in – the town of Bruay, well to the rear. It was to remain there for almost an entire month.



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

And then it was to serve for even more than a month in the *La Folie Sector*, from February 11 until March 22. On the next day, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion had transferred to Maisnil Bouche where, on the morrow... *Day spent cleaning up and getting ready for special training.*

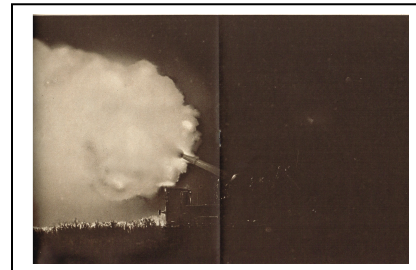
Something, this becoming obvious to all, was in the offing and the troops were to be busy digesting new ideas in soldiery: learning the topography of the ground to be attacked; the use of the enemy's weapons which, when captured, were to be turned against him; the by-passing and thus isolation of strong-points instead of the costly assault; the coaching of each and every soldier as to his role on the day; the increased employment of aircraft in directing the advance; the concept of a machine-gun barrage; and the exchange of information between the infantry and artillery so as to co-ordinate efforts...

...and at *Vimy Ridge*, the use of tunnels and underground approaches to mask from the enemy the presence of troops and also to ensure the same troops' security.

For the personnel of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion, this training and preparation for the coming attack had continued until the afternoon of April 7. The entire day of the 8<sup>th</sup> had been spent moving forward but, apparently owing to the bad condition of the communication trenches, the troops had not taken place in their jumping-off positions until one o'clock in the morning of April 9: four and a-half hours to wait.

As the final days had passed, the artillery barrage had grown progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion had described it as...*drums\**.

By this time, of course, the Germans had been aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn had thrown retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been very busy.



*(Right: A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration)*

***\*It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – see above - also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it all to happen.***

On April 9 of 1917 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 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 the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

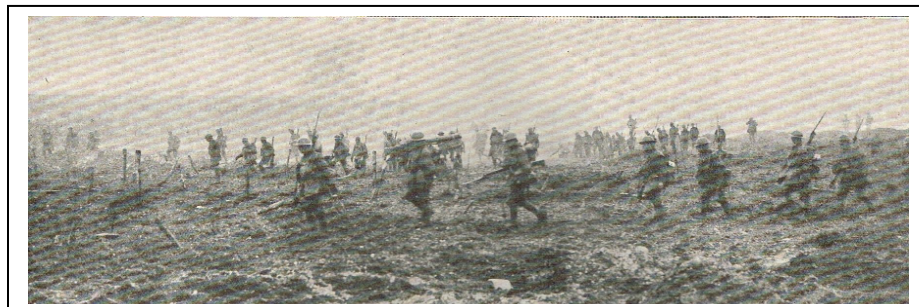
While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be yet a further disaster.

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



On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, separate entity, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

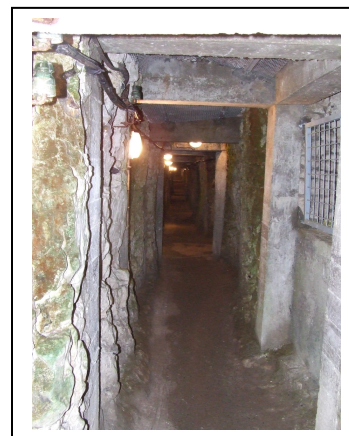
***(Right: Canadian troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration)***



While Battalions of the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions attacked the Ridge itself, it was the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions which had been confided the responsibility of clearing the slope to the southward, including the village of Thélus, in the direction of Arras. The objectives of both Divisions had been realized early on the day of the attack.

The success of April 9, of course, came at a price: by the end of the day the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion had incurred a total of two-hundred forty-one casualties.

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



(continued)

On April 10 the Canadians had finished clearing the whole area of *Vimy Ridge* of the few remaining pockets of resistance and had begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the habitual German counter-attacks – which in fact never amounted to much.

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

There had, on those two days, been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such the previous days' success had been ordered consolidated - and would have proved to be logistically impossible because of the weather.



Thus the Germans had closed the breach and the conflict once more had reverted to one of inertia.

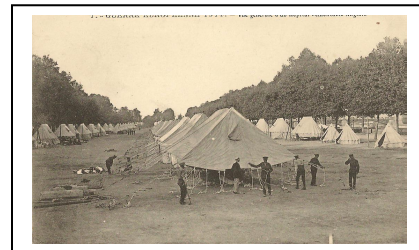
On that April 9, a Lance Corporal Rose of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion was reported as having been *killed in action*. To replace this loss of a junior non-commissioned officer, Private O'Reilly received immediate promotion *in the field* to that rank.

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. In fact, there were to be times, such as at Fresnoy in early May, when the enemy had successfully – and at a heavy cost to both the Canadians and the British – re-taken ground which had only recently been lost to them.

By the beginning of June much of the Canadian Corps had been transferred back to the sectors north of where it had just been fighting, from the vicinity of Neuville St-Vaast up to the historic town of Béthune. After the efforts of the recent confrontation, the units were once more to be reinforced and re-organized, and were also to undergo further training in areas to the rear. This relative calm was to last until the middle of August.

By that time Lance Corporal O'Reilly had received medical attention - for seven weeks less a day - and had been back serving with his unit since June 8.

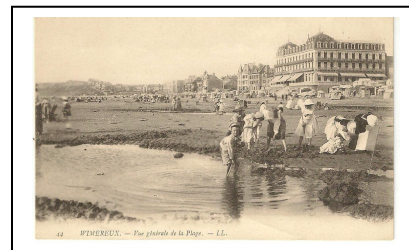
It had been on April 21 that he had been admitted into the Corps Rest Station, a facility for which the 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance was responsible. There diagnosed as suffering from myalgia, pains in the muscles, three days later he was then transferred to the 18<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station in the area of LaPugnoy.



(continued)

**(Right above: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War: Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)**

Two days afterwards, Lance Corporal O'Reilly was forwarded to the 6<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Lillers before, on the following day, being transported by the 29<sup>th</sup> Ambulance Train to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian General Hospital in the coastal town of Wimereux, adjacent to Boulogne. Only two days later again he was in Boulogne itself, at the 1<sup>st</sup> Convalescent Depot from where he was discharged on the morrow, May 30, to the nearby 3<sup>rd</sup> Rest Camp, also at Boulogne.



**(Right above: The coastal resort of Wimereux at a period prior to the Great War at which time it was to become part of an important medical complex – from a vintage post-card)**

The rest in question lasted for two days at most as, on June 1, Lance Corporal O'Reilly was reported as having arrived at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étaples where he was classified immediately as *Class 'A' - fit for duty*. This being the case, he was despatched on the same day to report to the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Entrenching Battalion\* where he remained posted for a single week before being ordered on June 8 to return to duty with his unit, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

**\*These units, as the name suggests, were employed in defence construction and other related tasks. They comprised men who not only had at least a fundamental knowledge and experience of such work but who also had the physique to perform it. However they also came to serve as reinforcement pools where men awaiting the opportune moment to join their appointed unit might be gainfully employed for a short period of time.**



**(Right above: Canadian troops from an unspecified unit engaged in road construction, this also being a job to which entrenching battalions were to be assigned – from Le Miroir or Illustration)**

It was towards the end of the month of that same June, the date the 27<sup>th</sup>, that Lance Corporal O'Reilly's dossier records that he was...*Deprived of Lance Stripe for using insubordinate language to his senior NCO.*

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 from this area, as well as his reserve forces, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front in and around the city and mining-centre of Lens.



The Canadians were to be major contributors to this effort.

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

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

On August 13 at six-thirty in the evening, the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered to move forward into the support area. Its numbers were by now depleted – twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-two *other ranks* – to about sixty per cent of establishment battalion strength.

There was to be a fight for an anonymous rise of ground, identified only as *Hill 70*.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained engaged in the fight for *Hill 70*\* and for the northern suburbs of Lens until the night of August 17-18. Having played its role in a still-ongoing struggle, the unit then retired back to Cité St-Pierre where for the next number of nights it provided carrying-parties to supply ammunition to the front.

(Right: *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: The use of the head-band – the 'tump' – was adopted from the North American indigenous peoples. – from Le Miroir*)

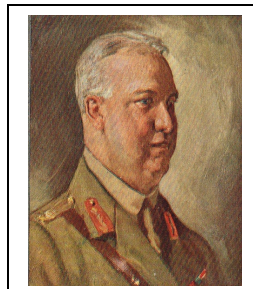
The 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion by then counted but thirteen officers and two-hundred sixty-five other ranks.

*\*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 - the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.*

(Right above: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 2014*)

(Right: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)

(continued)



When exactly it was that Private O'Reilly was wounded and the circumstances thereof appear not to be recorded. The War Diary cites that by the time of the relief of the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion on the night of August 17-18, during the tour it had incurred forty-one *killed in action*, two-hundred thirty-eight *wounded* and thirty-six *missing in action*.

A Canadian Casualty Report records that he had incurred gun-shot wounds to the nose and neck and that by August 18 he had been admitted into the 22<sup>nd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at Bruay.

The son of Thomas O'Reilly, labourer, and of Ellen O'Reilly (née *O'Neille* (sic), deceased in or about 1919) – to whom as of April 1, 1916, he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay and also to whom, in a Will dated April 27, 1916, he had bequeathed his all – of Placentia, Newfoundland, before the family's emigration to Cape Breton, he was also brother to Frederick, Ruth-May, May-Bridget, Joseph, Frank, Thomas and Mary.

Private O'Reilly was reported as having *died of wounds* at ten minutes to seven in the morning of August 18, 1917, by the Officer Commanding the 22<sup>nd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station.

(Right: *The War Memorial in Placentia honours the sacrifice of Neil O'Reilly – the date on the stone, August 15, appears to be wrong by three days. – photograph from 2014*)

James\* Neil O'Reilly had enlisted at the *apparent* age of eighteen years and eight months: date of birth in Placentia, Newfoundland, December 21, 1897 (from attestation papers). Copies of the Placentia Roman Catholic Birth Records cite December 21, 1895 – a discrepancy of two years – as having been his birth date.



*\*This name appears to be found only in parish birth records.*

Private James Neil O'Reilly 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 24, 2023.