

**Private James Organ, Number 793110 of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.**

**(Right: *The image of the Canadian Grenadier Guards cap badge is from the Regimental Rogue web-site.*)**

**(continued)**

**His occupations prior to military service recorded as being those of both *fisherman* and *sailor*, James Organ may have been the young man who traversed the Cabot Strait from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on April 23 of 1915. He had taken passage on the Steamship *Bruce* and was on route to the New Brunswick community of Chatham\* for a reason that is not documented in his dossier.**

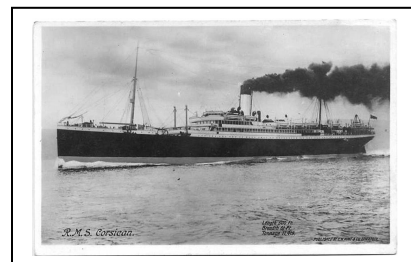
*\*Chatham is also cited on James Organ's attestation papers as being his address at that time.*

His first pay records record that he was first remunerated for his services by the Canadian Army on November 26 of 1915 – thus logically this was the date on which he was enlisted. However, almost a further four weeks were to pass before Private Organ was called upon to attest and to undergo a medical examination – which found him fit for overseas services - on December 20.

On that same day the formalities of the whole affair were brought to a conclusion by the commanding officer of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*North Shore*), Lieutenant-Colonel Mesereau, when he declared – on paper – that... *James Organ...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of the Attestation.* It was also by the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, based in Chatham, that Private Organ was now to be *taken on strength* for almost a full year.

Where exactly it was that Private Organ and his fellow recruits were to train for those months is not clear, but logically it was at the armoury which the town numbered among its facilities and which had been built to accommodate the *North Shore Regiment* of the Canadian Militia\*.

*\*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.*



It was not until October 26 of that 1916 that the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion boarded His Majesty's Transport *Corsican* in the harbour at Halifax. Also embarking on the vessel for passage to the United Kingdom were the Second Part of the 169<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry and the MD 6 Cyclist Platoon, it on its way to *Chiseldon Camp*.

(Right above: *The image of a pre-war Royal Mail Ship Corsican is from the [bing.com/images](http://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.*)

*Corsican* docked on November 5 in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool, where the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was now to board a train.

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Its destination was likely the large Canadian military complex by then established in the southern county of Hampshire and in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott, the latter having lent its name to the camp.

Apparently the period of training undertaken back home in Canada had been satisfactory to the Army authorities – fourteen weeks was the norm - as it was to be only a month



later when a number of men from the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Private Organ among their number, was designated to be re-enforcements for the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) which was already serving on the Continent. On December 3 the transfer was made on paper, and Private Organ was a soldier on the nominal roll of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion\*.

(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)

*\*The 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion remained in existence only until the middle of January of 1917, some six weeks later, when its remaining personnel were absorbed by the 13<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion. By far the majority of the two-hundred sixty Overseas Battalions authorized by the Government of Canada went no further than the United Kingdom. There they were to serve as re-enforcement pools for the fifty or so units of the four Canadian Divisions serving on the Continent. This was the fate which was to befall the 132<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.*

Two days after having been *taken on strength* by the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, on December 5, the re-enforcement draft was on its way to France, likely travelling from the south-coast port of Southampton to its French counterpart, Le Havre, an industrial city situated at the estuary of the River Seine. There the Canadians had constructed a Base Depot through which passed any and all arrivals from England, to be processed before proceeding to the units to which they had been assigned.



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

Private Organ was one of the relatively small number of one-hundred seventy-seven arrivals to report to duty to the Base Depot at that time – maybe all destined for the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He was now to remain there until January 4 when he was despatched to seek out the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The Battalion War Diarist records in his only entry for January 6 of 1917, that... *60 other ranks from the 132<sup>nd</sup> Bn. C.I. arrived as reinforcements.*

Four days earlier, Private Organ's new unit had been serving in the forward area in *Zouave Valley* before having been relieved to retire to Berthonval Wood in reserve. For reasons that he has left the reader to speculate upon, the same War Diarist has foregone entries for January 4 and 5. Perhaps little or nothing of importance really *did* happen on those days.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) was an element of the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, the last such Canadian formation to be despatched to *active service* on the Western Front during the Great War\*.

*\*There was also a Canadian 5<sup>th</sup> Division but, once having been formed, it remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of*

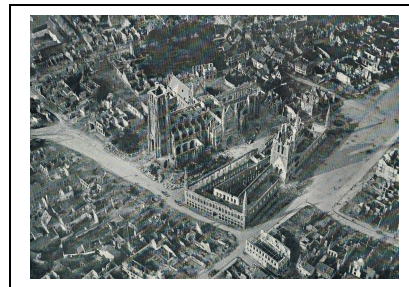




*the Great War, for training and re-enforcement purposes.*

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

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had arrived in France some three months before Private Organ, on September 12 of 1916 landing in the French port-city of Le Havre. Three days later it had been on its way north, to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and then beyond, to serve six weeks in a sector to the south-west of the vestiges of the medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).



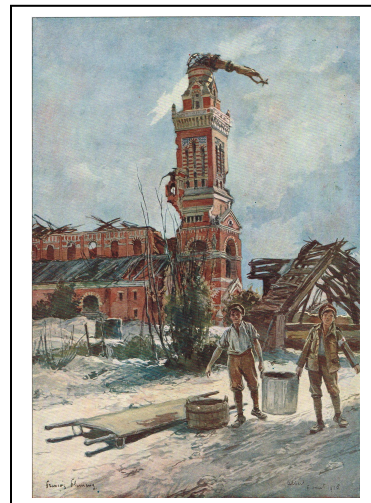
*(Right above: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration)*

On October 3, 1916, having been withdrawn from Belgium only days before to undergo training in north-western France, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered by the British High Command to move south, to the area of *the Somme*, where the wretched British summer offensive had by now become a campaign of the autumn as well.

Having travelled from the north at first by train and then on foot, the unit had arrived in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert a week later. There the Battalion bivouacked, at *Brickfields Camp*.

Meanwhile, by early September of 1916, when Canadian troops had first made their appearance in that particular theatre of the War, the *First Battle of the Somme* had already been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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



On the first day of *1<sup>st</sup> Somme* all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being 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, 1916, at Beaumont-Hamel.

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

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New

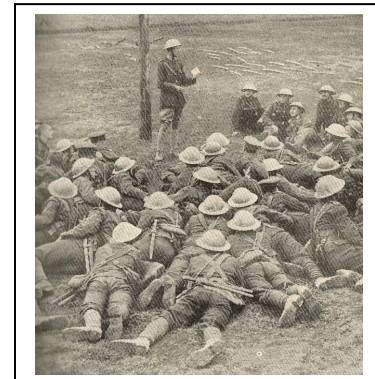




Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette, a confrontation which was to occur some seven weeks before the arrival of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion on the scene.

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



The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been in the forward trenches since October 17, but it was not until six minutes past mid-day on October 21 that the unit eventually put it its attack and captured the *Regina Trench* strong-point, an objective which had previously proved to be impregnable.

This success was unfortunately to be short-lived and *Regina Trench* was subsequently ceded back to the Germans following a counter-attack.

The Battalion had then retired but had remained in the area of Pozières until October 30 when it moved into billets, further to the rear, in the town of Albert itself.



In November the unit had moved back into the area of *Regina Trench* on two further occasions: the first passed with little incident; however, during the second tour, the Battalion had been part of a further attack on November 18. *Regina Trench* having by then been definitively captured, the objective on this date had been to occupy a number of adjacent German positions. The operation had been only partially successful and the unit had incurred a total of another two-hundred thirty-two killed, wounded and missing in action.



(Right above and right: Some of the remnants of the village of Pozières as it was after the Great War, in 1919 – and as it is a century later. The Australian War Memorial may be seen in both images. – colour photograph from 2016)

(continued)

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

Relieved on the day following the attack, on November 22 the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun to march away from *the Somme*. By December 4 the unit had marched in a semi-circle – to the



west and then to the north - to Fréwillers, some twenty-five kilometres north-west of the city of Arras.

From that time until the last week in March of the following year, 1917, the unit – as with most other Canadian units – had been posted in the sectors of the line between Béthune in the north and Arras in the south. There, during that winter of 1916-1917, they had settled into the daily routines, rigours and perils of life in the trenches\*.

As now did Private Organ and his draft as of January 6, 1917.

*\*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: 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)*



\* \* \* \* \*

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, as had most British and Commonwealth units, was to take a real beating at *the Somme*. Private Organ's draft brought to four-hundred fifty-two the total number of re-enforcements who had reported *to duty* with the unit since its withdrawal from the battlefields on November 19. That is almost fifty percent of full battalion strength.

The winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of the every-day grind of life in and out of the trenches. There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.

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

On March 26 the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved from its then-current tour in the front-line positions and withdrawn to a rest area at Chateau de la Haie. From the next day until April 2 the unit was to undergo extensive training for the upcoming British offensive, so whether



there was much *rest* to be enjoyed is to be speculated – but then, no-one had been shot at.

On April 3, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had moved to the front area.

On April 4, 5 and 6 it had supplied working parties and dug trenches.

On April 7, the final elements of the Battalion had moved forward to the front area.

By ten o'clock on the evening of April 8, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had reported itself to be in its battle positions.

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 *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.

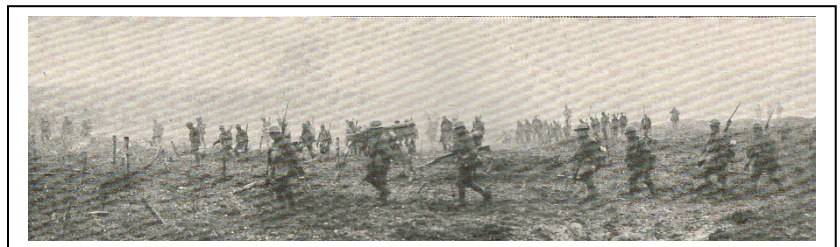


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade operating under Canadian command - 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, 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*)



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Excerpt from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary of April 9, 1917: *Easter Monday, zero hour 5.30 A.M. The Battalion, 520 strong all ranks, went “over the top” supported by a strong artillery barrage.*

Excerpts from 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for April 9, 1917:

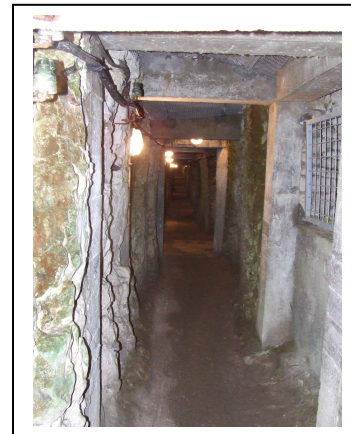
*12.25 p.m. - 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion report that a party of 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion who were out in front of BASSO (Trench) were counter attacked by the enemy, and believe that some of our men were taken prisoners.*



**12.55 p.m. – The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion advise that they are sending out a Lewis Gun Officer, with 4 guns, and 20 men to clean up the situation around the Old German Front Line & proceed on to BASSO after this is accomplished.**

**2.00 p.m. – O.C., 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion reports one Machine Gun of the 11<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Coy. operating sixty yards left of crater where LIEUT. Hannaford and his party are established.**

**(Right: Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later on: They were hewn out of the limestone to ensure secrecy and, at the same time, the security of the attacking troops – photograph from 2008(?))**



The Battalion assault had enjoyed only mixed results at first, even some of the successful attackers being forced to retire because their flanks had become vulnerably exposed. Eventually, however, the advance continued, one of the last actions going in at a quarter to seven in the evening to clear two more trenches of the enemy.

By the late evening of April 10 the Canadian Corps had cleared the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance and had begun to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks – which, in fact, were never to amount to very much.

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

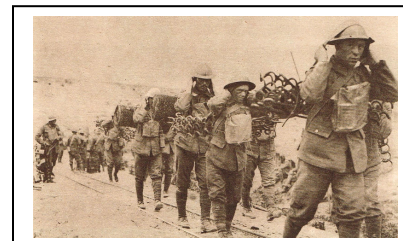
There had, on that second day, been the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on the previous day's success had proved logistically impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.



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.

Private Organ's 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had again reverted to that routine of life in the trenches, now in the *Lens Sector*.

In contrast to June, much of July was to be spent in reserve in the area of Chateau de la Haie. Parades, lectures, drills, inspections, visits from Brigade and Divisional Commanders as well as from the High Command, sports and working parties were all the order of the day. The Battalion had even lined the sides of the road on one particular date when His



**Majesty King George V was passing by.**

**(Right above: A further photograph of a Canadian working-party carrying supplies of all kinds to the troops in forward positions – from *Le Miroir*)**

The early part of that earlier month of June, however, for the seven days from the 5<sup>th</sup> until and including the 12<sup>th</sup>, had been particularly active with a succession of eight raids undertaken by the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the area in front of and overlooked by Vimy Ridge. That of June 8 was a larger affair involving three battalions – the 75<sup>th</sup>, the 87<sup>th</sup> and the 102<sup>nd</sup> – in the area of La Coulotte preceded by a heavy Canadian artillery barrage. The German response – delivered in a like manner - caused some two-hundred casualties among the troops of the three attacking units.

**The raid continued all of that night... 12.20 a.m. The RED LINE (Enemy Reserve system of trenches) was in our hands, with the exception of a small stretch in the vicinity of the BREWERY... Seventy prisoners were taken...five machine captured and three destroyed; one Trench Mortar destroyed.**



**(Right above: Canadian troops operating in the forward area during the spring or summer of 1917 – from *Illustration*)**

**Bright moonlight was expected to assist the attack, but the sky was overcast, & the night dark. Enemy's casualties estimated at 1,000, chiefly inflicted by our barrage, although he held his ground to the end.**

**1.15 a.m. The raiding Battalions retired to our original front line, leaving a screen of outposts in advance of final objective.**

**1.45 a.m. The outposts withdrew under cover of a light barrage.**

**5.30 a.m. Our patrols report that enemy has reoccupied his former trenches.**



**No counter attack was made by the enemy. His stretcher parties were active during this day. Ours also active, some crossing over enemy's front line; with his permission... (Excerpts from 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 9, 1917)**

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

The proceedings of those two days, June 8 and 9, had cost the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion a total of one-hundred thirty-nine casualties. Private Organ had been one of them.

**Casualty report of February 22, 1918: - Previously reported Missing now for official purposes presumed to have died on or since June 9, 1917**

The son of George Organ, fisherman, and of Eliza Organ (née *Thorne*) – to whom he had allocated as of November 1, 1916, a monthly twenty dollars from his pay; and to whom on

November 29 of 1916 he had willed his all – he was also brother to John, Clement, Freeman, Annie, to Clayton and to Job.

Private Organ was at first reported as *missing in action* on June 9, 1916, then later *presumed dead* on or since that same date.

James Organ had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty years: date of birth at Burnt Islands, District of Burgeo la Poile, Newfoundland, June 30, 1895 (from attestation papers).

Private James Organ 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 26, 2023.

