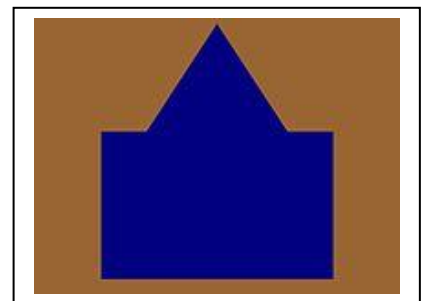


Private John Thomas Parsons, Number 116907 of the 29th Battalion (*Vancouver*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 29th Battalion (Vancouver) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)



(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a rancher, John Thomas Parsons appears to have left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of British Columbia. All that appears to be certain is that by the time of his enlistment he was a resident of the Nazko Valley to the north of Vancouver, and that in May of 1916 he was present in the capital city of Victoria.

According to his pay records, John Thomas Parsons enlisted on May 4 of 1916* – this the first day on which the Canadian Army was to remunerate him for his services – and was on that same day *taken on strength* by the 11th Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles**. One week later, on May 11, he was recorded as having presented himself in Victoria for both a medical examination – he was pronounced as...*fit for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force* - and for attestation.

**The venue of his enlistment is not documented.*

***Sources record that the 11th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, by the time of Private Parsons' enlistment, had been re-designated on April 23, 1916 as the 11th Overseas Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion.*

There were by that time no horses to be taken care of as the Battalion was no longer mounted and its personnel were foot-soldiers. At mid-night of December 31 of 1915 and January 1, 1916, the Canadian 3rd Division had officially come into being on the European Continent, its 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade composed of four battalions of former Canadian Mounted Rifle Regiments. The horses had been disposed of by that time and the Regiments, having been roughly one-half the strength of an infantry battalion, had been amalgamated to man the four full-strength Canadian Mounted Rifle Battalions.

On the following day, May 12, the formalities of Private Parsons' enlistment were brought to a conclusion when the commanding officer of the 11th Overseas Canadian Mounted Rifles Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Guy Hamilton Kirkpatrick, D.S.O., declared – on paper – that...*John Thomas Parsons...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Having thus received his commanding officer's approval, Private Parsons and his fellow recruits were thereupon posted to *Willow* (also *Willow's*) *Camp* in or in the vicinity of Victoria for training.

Just over two months later, on July 16, the 11th Battalion CMR, having been travelling across the continent by train since July 8, embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Lapland* in the harbour at Halifax. Private Parsons' unit was not to travel alone: also on board the vessel and taking passage to the United Kingdom were the 98th Battalion of Canadian Infantry as well as the Second Draft of the Canadian Army Medical Corps Training Depot.

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



(continent)

It was nine days later that *Lapland* docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool. Having disembarked, the 11th Battalion CMR thereupon was transferred by train to the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* established by then in the county of Kent, down the Dover Straits and in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone.

Private Parsons was to remain there at Shorncliffe, at the subsidiary *Cheriton Camp*, for the next three months*. It was then to be on October 13 of that 1916, that he was drafted to the 29th Battalion (*Vancouver*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force which was already serving on the Continent. He crossed to France later on that same day.

(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)



**The remaining 11th Battalion CMR personnel, those who were not to be transferred to other units in the meantime, remained there until May of 1917 when they were absorbed into the 24th Canadian Reserve Battalion. The 11th CMR Battalion was never to serve on active service, either on the Western Front or in other theatre of the Great War. It was officially disbanded on July 27 of 1918.*

Travelling through nearby Folkestone, Private Parsons' draft disembarked in the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite and some two hours' sailing-time away. From there a train took the detachment south to the vicinity of the industrial city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. By that time, the Canadians had established a large Base Depot there, one of the primary purposes of which was to organize and equip incoming re-enforcements from England before despatching them at an appropriate time to their new units in the field.

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



The time was apparently not propitious for Private Parsons to join the 29th Battalion immediately – as will be seen below – and it was not until three weeks after his arrival at the Depot, on November 6, that he, one of a re-enforcement draft of eighty-one other ranks - was despatched to report to duty.

This he did on the following day, November 7, 1916.

(continued)



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

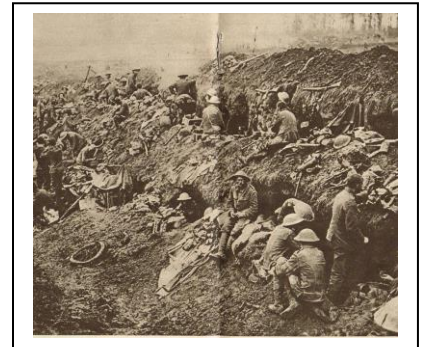
At the time, the 29th Battalion was in a sector in close proximity to the communities of Souchez and Lorette, to the north-west of Arras, and to where the unit had withdrawn after having retired from the *First Battle of the Somme* during the first week of October. This was an area to the rear and, apparently, according the Battalion War Diarist, *usual* working-parties had been sent out on that day - and it was raining.

* * * * *

The 29th Battalion (*Vancouver*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force was a component of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division. It had crossed the English Channel to France on September 17 of 1915, also through the ports of Folkestone and Boulogne.

Unlike Private Parsons' Draft, it had not then travelled via Le Havre, as the Canadian Base Depot there was as yet not in operation, but had, within five days of its arrival on the Continent, been ordered across the Franco-Belgian frontier, to Camp Aldershot, to become familiar with the rigours, routines and perils of life in the trenches*.

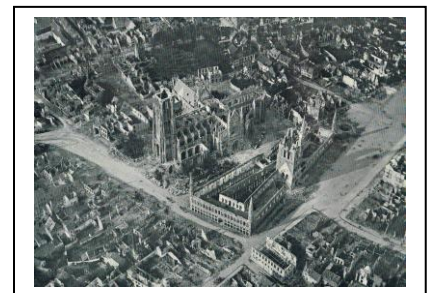
**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter 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 while at Aldershot that things became just that little bit more real for the personnel of the 29th Battalion: Private Colin McDonald, Number 75370, was killed by a rifle bullet on September 26. He was to be the unit's first fatality of the War.



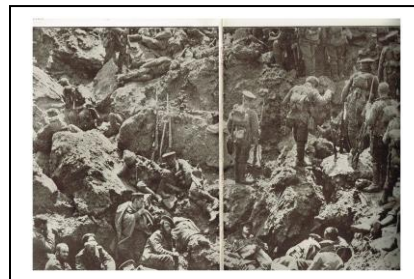
The sector for which the 2nd Canadian Division eventually became responsible during that autumn and then the winter of 1915-1916 was north of the border and south of the shattered medieval city of Ypres: more precisely, from the area of Kemmel in the south to Voormezeele in the north.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *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*)

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry operation. It was at a place called St-Éloi where, on the 27th 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 later pursue the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the often putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and then a resolute German defence, greeted the 2nd Canadian Division newcomers who had taken over from the by-then exhausted British on April 3-4.



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

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

At the very beginning of April, the 29th Battalion had been operating near Reninghelst to the west before moving towards Voormezeele and Scottish Wood to the north-west of St-Éloi. There most of its personnel had been deployed until April 9 when the entire 6th Brigade was relieved. The 29th Battalion's casualties for this tour in the line had finally amounted to seventeen *killed in action*, eighty-seven *wounded* and a further thirteen reported as *missing in action*.

Some nine weeks later, on June 2, the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and therefore British) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Railway Dugouts*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: *Mount Sorrel*.



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

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



(continued)

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 able to patch up their defences.

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

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



The German attack had primarily been on the part of the front held by the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division*, but such was its ferocity that units from the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions had been called upon to help hold the line. This was also true at the very end of the confrontation when troops from particularly the Canadian 1st Division had been employed in the final attack of June 12-13.

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



**It was apparently much more of a hill before June of 1917 when a British mine blew off its summit on the opening day of the Battle of the Messines Ridge.*

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



**The Canadian 3rd Division had officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. However, unlike its two predecessors, it had been formed on the Continent, some of its units having already been on active service there for months. Others were not to arrive until the early weeks of 1916, thus it was not until March of that year that the Division had been capable of assuming responsibility for any sector. When this moment had eventually arrived, the Division had been thrust into the south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

The 29th Battalion had not been among those most actively engaged at *Mount Sorrel*; at the outset other units from the 6th Brigade had been sent forward but the 29th had been ordered to remain in reserve. On July 6 it had been ordered sent forward to establish a series of posts north of the *Menin Road* and to undertake a bombing raid but neither operation was to be entirely successful.

(continued)

There had also been a brief encounter with enemy troops at four o'clock on the following morning, July 7, but it had been driven off. For the remaining days of the confrontation it appears that it was to be the enemy artillery which posed the most danger to the Battalion and the unit did not have a role to play in the final attack of June 12 and 13.

On June 14 the 29th Battalion had been relieved, two companies retiring into the ramparts of Ypres thence to *Dickebusch Huts* while the other two had been bussed further afield to *Camp 'D'*. Things were now about to become relatively quiet for a goodly number of weeks.

On August 19 the Battalion received notification that it was to be on the move the following morning. On that same day the *other ranks... Turned in all Ross Rifles and received Lee Enfield short rifles instead**. (29th Battalion War Diary)

**The Canadian-made Ross Rifle was apparently a well-designed and well-engineered weapon but it was not a rifle designed for the rigours of the battlefield. The dirt and heat of the fight caused it to jam – stories, perhaps apocryphal, have soldiers jumping on the bolts (another problem) to release them – as did the smallest discrepancy in the dimensions of a cartridge. In contrast to the Ross, the Lee-Enfield was still to be in service even after the Second World War.*

As per that afore-mentioned notification, on the morrow, August 20... *Paraded at 8.30 a.m., full marching order. Joined Brigade at 9.00 a.m., and marched to STEENVOORD (sic) via RENINGHELST and ABEELE, arriving at 2.30 p.m.*

On the following day again the march to MERCKEGHEM took just under ten hours. This community was directly to the west again from Ypres, Poperinghe and Steenvoorde. According to the Battalion War Diarist the country was very beautiful and the... *Channel and shores of England visible from Church Tower.*

The object of this exercise – and of all the other exercises which were to follow in the next thirteen days - was to prepare the Battalion – and also the entire 2nd Division – for what was optimistically described by some as *open warfare* to be undertaken in a different theatre of war.

Activities were to include route marches; communication drill; musketry; bombing; lectures; section and platoon drill; semaphore; machine-gun classes; stretcher-bearer classes; clothing and equipment inspections; even training in co-operation with aircraft.

(Right: *Canadian troops undergoing training exercises during the time prior to their involvement at First Somme – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)



This *different theatre of war* was to the south, in an area which the French had recently relinquished to the British and where the armies of the two Allies converged: the French *Département de la Somme*, named for the river that meanders through the region.

(continued)

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

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

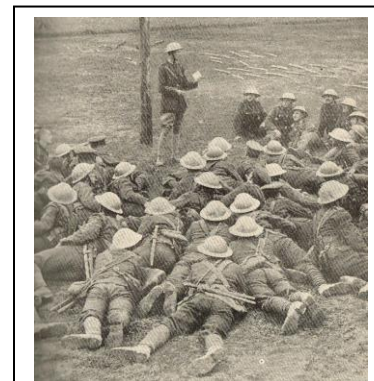
(Right: At Beaumont-Hamel looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which today stands atop part of the German front-line defences - The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph from 2009)



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 – the Anzacs - (July 23), before the Canadians had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

Their first collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

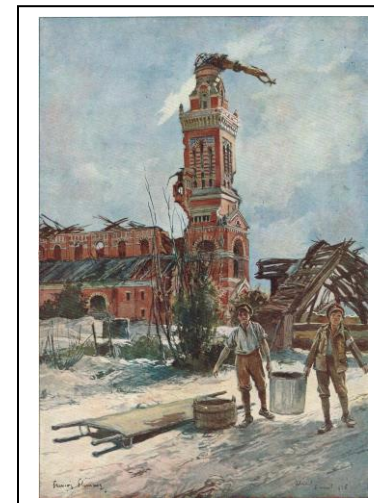
(Right: An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, September 1916 – from *The War Illustrated*)



On September 4, the... *Battalion* marched to St. Omer at 6.30 p.m. and entrained for Candas. Left St. Omer at 7.03 P.M. Arrived Candas at 8.00 A.M. and marched to LaVicogne. Arrived at LaVicogne at noon. In billets... (Excerpts from Battalion War Diary entries for September 4 and 5, 1916)

Two further days of marching were to follow before the unit found itself at *Brickfields Camp*, established in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

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



Two more days of training had followed, much of it involving – surely for specific personnel – communications with aircraft. Others had been busy laying cable.

(continued)

During the day of September 10... *Battalion left during the afternoon, in small parties, to take over the front line trenches...from the 1st Battalion. But before leaving Brickfields Camp... all ranks from British Columbia voted on prohibition, women suffrage and for the Provincial Legislature.* (From War Diary entry of September 10).



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

By the end of that day, the 29th Battalion had completed the relief and was posted in trenches in front of Pozières.

During those days spent in the front line before the attack of September 15 on German positions at Flers and Courcelette, the enemy had kept up a continuous bombardment of the Battalion positions; they had even mounted a small raid, subsequently beaten off. Working-parties, nonetheless, had been essential to carry forward all the necessities of the assault. These the Battalion provided, as well as having been ordered to dig several trench-works.

On the evening of September 14 the unit had been pulled back to trenches adjacent to Brigade Reserve. Despite the fact that its personnel had not ventured out its front-line positions, during that first four-day tour at *the Somme* the unit had incurred a total of eighty-six casualties of which fifteen had been fatal.

It would not be correct, however, to say that the unit, even though now in reserve, was to play no role in the events of September 15: three of its four companies had supplied carrying-parties between the Brigade dump up to the two battalions who were attacking between Courcelette and the Pozières-Bapaume Road. And at the same time, the fourth company had furnished stretcher-bearers... *Killed 3 O.R. wounded 39 O.R.*



(Right above: *A stretcher-bearer goes about his duty, somewhere on the Somme. These men shared the dangers of the infantryman – which, of course, they often were. – from Illustration*)

On the afternoon of September 15 the Battalion had moved back to *Brickfields Camp* and bivouacked. The night, however, was to be short for all the personnel – including the just-arrived ninety-four re-enforcements – as at eight-thirty in the morning of the next day the unit had been ordered - most likely on foot - to billets at not-so-distant Warloy.

More of the same was to follow on the morrow: in heavy rain the unit had moved to the vicinity of Val de Maison where it had gone under canvas.

(continued)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the lodgings were found to be... *cold and disagreeable*. It is unlikely that even the call of congratulations from the Canadian Corps Commander had sufficed to warm the atmosphere very much.

The next day the unit had been on the march to Bonneville where a count was made of the casualties incurred since, and including, September 10: one-hundred sixty-one all told of which twenty-eight had been *killed in action*. Then a small draft had arrived; the billets had been found to be good; and everyone had taken a bath: spirits were high.

On September 22 the Battalion had begun to retrace its steps back to Albert and beyond; by the late evening of September 25 the unit had moved into trenches just to the east of Courcellette.



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

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



The march from September 16 to 25 had not been undertaken only on a whim of the High Command. The general offensive begun on the 15th had continued long after the withdrawal of the first attacking battalions. As further troops were arriving on the scene, quarters had to be made available for them, thus the 29th Battalion and others had been ordered out of the area of Albert to free up billets.

The Battalion had put in an attack on the next day, September 26. It was apparently to succeed in gaining about one-hundred yards of shattered ground, but not a great deal more. Relieved two days later, the unit had counted the cost: two-hundred seventy-six of which fifty-two dead.

At the beginning of October the 29th Battalion was to be posted forward – from October 1 to – to the area of *Regina Trench*, this to be a major obstacle to the Canadians until its final capture on November 10-11. During this tour there would be little if any offensive action undertaken by the unit and most of its time had been spent in digging assembly trenches and jumping-off trenches, these to be used only days hence. They had also found time to bury the dead.

As it transpired, those newly-dug positions were not to be used by the Battalion. Having incurred a count of twenty-three wounded during the tour, the unit had fallen back at first to *Brickfields Camp* before having begun to march west to the area of Warloy-Baillon.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Warloy-Baillon* was also a centre for medical facilities, the *Communal Cemetery Extension* pictured here a necessary addition: over thirteen-hundred Commonwealth dead of the Great War – most of First Somme – as well as eighteen former adversaries lie within its bounds. – photograph from 2017)

Whether those marching soldiers of the 29th Battalion had been aware of it or not at the time is not recorded, but the realization must surely soon have begun to sink in: for them the *First Battle of the Somme* had come to a conclusion.

They had marched by a semi-circular itinerary: west to Val de Maison, Pernois, Gezaincourt, then northwards to the west of the city of Arras to Gouy-en-Ternois, before turning north-east and on to La Comte, Hersin and, on the following day, the trenches in nearby Noulette Wood. By the end of the month the unit had then moved to positions in the *Souchez Sector*.



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

This area, from Arras in the south to the town of Béthune in the north was to be the destination for all the units of the Canadian Corps as they were withdrawn from *the Somme*. It was to remain much a Canadian responsibility for the remainder of the Great War apart from brief periods during the spring and autumn of 1917, and August of 1918*.

**These exceptions coinciding with the battles of Arras, Third Ypres (Passchendaele) and Third Somme*

And it was, as has already been seen, in the *Souchez Sector* that Private Parsons, one of an eighty-one *other-rank* re-enforcement draft, reported *to duty* with the 29th Battalion on November 7 of 1916.

* * * * *

The late autumn of that 1916 – after the *First Battle of the Somme* - and the winter of 1916-1917 was a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce and to re-organize. There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.



(Right above: *The once-village of Souchez already looked like this by 1915 when it was the responsibility of the French Army. – from Le Miroir*)

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.



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

The 29th Battalion War Diarist for the months of January and February almost inevitably begins his sparse comments with a report on the day's weather. In all fairness to him, on most days there appears to have been little else to talk about.

The unit was ordered to various sectors of the front and rear; in the latter areas – where in fact the majority of this time was spent - there were usually training exercises to be undertaken and working-parties to be organized; in the forward areas it was the enemy artillery that often featured in the day's entry.

(Right above and right: *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 – damaged in 1793 and again during the Great War – are visible in both images. – from *Le Miroir* and (colour) from 2016)**



****Not to be confused with St-Éloi in Belgium in the region of which the 29th Battalion had served during the previous year.***

For the first week in March Private Parsons' Battalion served in support trenches before then being ordered to the rear area in the vicinity of Villers-au-Bois for two weeks of specialized training.

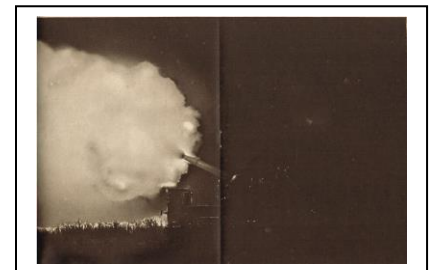
(Right: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, is the last resting-place for just over one-thousand two-hundred Commonwealth military personnel and thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017*)



Among these preparations were some novel developments: the use of captured enemy weapons; that each unit and each man be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

On March 24 the unit was sent back into support and another battalion took its place in training. It was not only the 29th Battalion which was to undergo this process but by far the majority of the entire Canadian Corps.

On April 1 it was noticeable that the artillery was now ranging onto its pre-selected targets and that the preliminary barrage was in its opening stages.



(Preceding page: *A heavy British artillery piece located in the Vimy Sector continues its deadly work throughout the night. – from Illustration*)

On April 4 the Battalion moved away from the forward area once more, to the area of Bois des Alleux. Apart from a bath for all personnel on April 7, the time was spent in organizing and re-organizing for the attack which was now imminent. On April 8, those with special assignments were ordered to their temporary units, and all equipment necessary was distributed at dumps to the troops as they made their forward to the assembly areas.

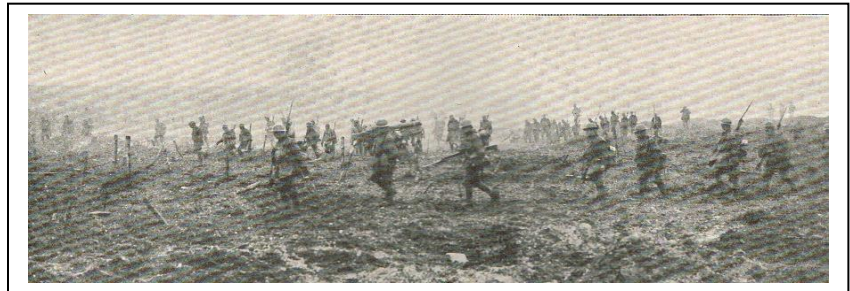
(Right below: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, has stood on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

On April 9 in that spring 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 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 effort at Arras proved an overall disappointment - the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

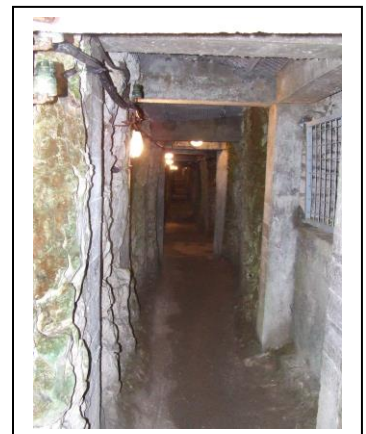
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity*, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



**In fact, British troops served under Canadian command.*

(Right above: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3^d 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*)

The Canadian 2nd Division was not responsible for the taking of *Vimy Ridge* itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the southern slope and therefore on the right-hand side of the attack. The Division's objectives were apparently captured on schedule and much of the remainder of that day and the next was to be spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.



(continued)

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

The Germans, having lost *Vimy Ridge* and the advantages of the high ground, retreated some three kilometres in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times was made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May.

There had been, on the first days, April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the ruptured enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day's success proved to be logistically impossible.

Thus the Germans were allowed the time to close the breach and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

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

The attack by the 29th Battalion, if the War Diarist is to be believed... *was carried out according to instructions. The artillery preparation was uniformly excellent and the German Trenches were practically obliterated. At ZERO HOUR, 5.30 a.m., the Fourth and Fifth Brigades advanced from their Assembly Area... At 8.05 a.m. the 29th Battalion moved forward from the Assembly Area to its allotted position behind the LENS-ARRAS Road and formed up ready for the advance at 9.35 a.m.*



At 9.35 a.m. on the barrage moving forward, the Battalion followed through behind it, and captured THELUS LINE without opposition and a few Germans were seen running...and every other man of the Front Wave advanced firing from the hip... Mopping-up parties...dug themselves in on the forward edge of the SUNKEN ROAD and established Headquarters. "A" and "B" Companies continued forward behind the barrage and gained their positions without encountering any resistance.

Hostile shelling...followed them but inflicted few casualties. Most casualties up to this time were caused by 'shorts' from our own barrage... Up to this point casualties were light.

At 12.26 pm the FOURTH PHASE commenced, but it was not until 1.30 p.m. that "D" Coy. could move forward to their position for advance. The advance was made under our barrage and the BROWN OBJECTIVE was gained at 2.15 p.m. During this advance, considerable enemy H.E. (high explosive) and shrapnel was directed on the Company and a Machine Gun...inflicted several casualties. The Woods were cleared and the lines established by 4.00 p.m... This phase ended with all the Battalion's objectives gained and touch established with the Flank battalions. (The above excerpts are from the 29th Battalion War Diary entry for April 9, 1917.)

(continued)

Thus the offensive action of the day as undertaken by the 29th Battalion came to a conclusion. The casualties incurred by Private Parsons' unit up until this time have been recorded in his journal by the War Diarist as seven *killed in action*, eighty-seven *wounded* and a further seven *missing in action*.

(Right: *Canadian troops and German prisoners organize the evacuation of wounded of both sides from Vimy Ridge on a light railway still being constructed by Pioneer troops following close behind the attacking infantry. – from Illustration*)



On the next day, April 10, in the area of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade's responsibility, the Germans retreated as far as the Arras to Lens railway line close to the village of Farbus.

The 29th Battalion was ordered to follow up this German withdrawal but, due to strong enemy resistance, was unable to reach its objectives. Later during that same night, Private Parsons' unit was relieved and withdrew once more to the *Neuville St-Vaast Sector*.

On the morrow morn it moved again, back to Mont St-Éloi.

From there the 29th Battalion made its way back and forth to the front and rear areas on several occasions. The 2nd Canadian Division was engaged in three major engagements before May 15, this date the official end to this, the *Battle of Arras*: at Arleux-en-Gohelle in late April, and at Fresnoy on May 3 and 8. However, the 29th Battalion appears to have figured in none of these confrontations.

The remainder of that month of May, 1917, was to be spent in support, then at the front, and to end in the Divisional Rest Camp at Neuville St-Vaast. It had been a quiet two weeks – and so was the entirety of June.

Maisnil-les-Ruitz was roughly ten kilometres behind the front lines of that summer of 1917 and out of range of all but the biggest German guns. Before the war it had been both a farming and mining community but currently its barns and cottages were being used to billet Canadian military personnel. It was now a large Canadian complex that served as a training area, a rest area and also as a place where the various units could compete, not only in events of military prowess, but also in the sports that were played back home.

And while the officers and *other ranks* were still segregated, each group was to represent his unit in the various activities and events that were on offer – or ordered. Whether fortuitously or otherwise, it would appear that an *esprit de corps* was being built.

Private Parsons' Battalion was to pass the whole month of June there, having arrived on the first day of the month, not to leave until the second day of July. That last-mentioned month was about to remind any personnel of the Battalion who had forgotten it, that there was still yet a war to be fought. While the last days of that period would be spent in Divisional Reserve, much of the rest of the time the unit was to be in the support and front-line trenches.

This pattern was to continue into August, during which period, on August 11, the Battalion was reported having been bombarded with gas shells. This, of course was nothing new, except that, on this occasion, there was a new odour detected. The troops were already all too familiar with chlorine and phosgene; now the Germans had added a new element to his arsenal: mustard gas.



(Right above: 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 to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America – from Le Miroir)

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



(Right above: 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)

The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort, one of the primary objectives of which was to be the so-named *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the mining-centre and city of Lens.



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

Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear.

Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.



(Right 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. – photograph from 1914)

Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.

(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action by its crew – from Le Miroir*)



The 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions had been chosen for this task. At the outset the 29th Battalion was to serve in support, but while being the target of enemy artillery and of at least one counter-attack, it was not until the night of August 18-19 that it moved to the front, to remain there until the night of August 22-23 when it was relieved and withdrawn.



(Right above: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70 a short time after its capture by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)

The Battalion War Diarist takes up the story with excerpts from the appendices for the month of August 1917:

The Battalion moved into support of the 5th Brigade on night 14/15th. Heavy shelling of back area with gas shells occurred on the way in...

At Zero hour on the 15th the Battalion moved forward to support area and remained there, in support of 5th Brigade until night 18/19th. ...the Battalion had to “stand to” very often during the day, and every night, on account of the danger of counter-attacks. The men got very little rest...and were subjected to a gas-shell bombardment from which nine casualties resulted, large blisters being raised on the skin...

On the night of the 17th...Scouts were sent out to reconnoitre COMMOTION Trench... the trench was bombarded three times during the night, and at 4.45 a.m. the enemy attacked, and penetrated our lines, but were driven out immediately...

On night 18/19th the Battalion relieved 20th Battn...taking over COMMOTION Trench. Enemy shelling during the latter part of the relief was severe...

Z day (the day of attack by 29th Battalion) was postponed by 24 hours, and this enabled us next night to get out reconnoitring parties to work on No Man’s Land. We established a post...and established complete mastery of No Man’s Land... The enemy kept up shelling of support area all night 19/20th and all day of the 20th... All telephone communication was rendered impossible...

(continued)

Zero hour was fixed for 4.35 a.m. August 21st. At 1.00 a.m...Companies began moving into assembly positions... At 4.10 a.m. messages were received from all Companies saying that they were in position... About 4.12 a.m. casualties began to occur in the assembly area, the Germans dropping shells all along in front of our parapet. Our own Artillery dropped shells short... Enemy shelling increased towards Zero hour on our left.

At about 4.30 a.m. a sudden heavy bombardment with enemy “fish-tails”, accompanied by what is described as a square box bomb which exploded with a great flame and emitted a dense, suffocating smoke, dropped in the trenches... A great deal of confusion was caused... Sgt. Croll...heard the word being passed down “Heine has broken through...and is coming down the trench”. He collected a few unwounded men and...succeeded in...keeping them back... By this German attack...our attack was pretty well broken up...

In other places the assault by the 29th Battalion carried on as planned, but the situation remained confused. By the end of the day it appears that little or no advance had been made and that some units had in fact fallen back in the face of continued enemy attacks and heavy shell fire. The overall result seems to have been a stale-mate.

The casualty count for that stale-mate of August 21, however, was heavy: sixty-five *killed in action*, one hundred-ninety *wounded* and fifty *missing in action*.

The son of James Parsons, mariner, and of Susannah Parsons (née *Dix*) – to whom on October 10, 1916, he had willed his everything – of Curling (also known as *Birchy Cove* at the time), Newfoundland, he was also younger brother to Charles-Henry.

Private Parsons was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 21 of 1917 during fighting in the area of *Hill 70*.

John Thomas Parsons had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-seven years and five months: date of birth in the Bay of Islands, Newfoundland, December 13, 1888.

Private John Thomas Parsons 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.

