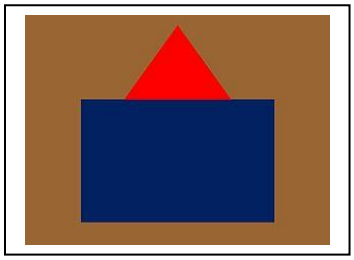
Private Matthew L*. Penny MM, (Number 877589) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Élouges Communal Cemetery, Belgium: Grave reference B.8.



(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 25th Battalion* (*Victoria Rifles*) *is from the Wikipedia web-site*.)

No name appears to be recorded in any available source.

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *brakeman*, Matthew Penny appears to have left no information behind him a propos his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The only thing that seems certain is that he was resident in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney in March of 1916, for that was where and when he enlisted.

It was his first pay-record which recorded him as being *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion on the very day of his enlistment, March 14, this being the date on which the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his services.

Only two days later, on March 16, he then underwent medical examination in Sydney and was attested at that same time. The formalities of his enlistment were not, however to be brought to a conclusion until some six weeks later again, on April 25, when the Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day declared – on paper – that…*877589, Private Matthew Penny…having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

By this time, Private Penny would have already undergone several weeks of training in the town of Broughton*, only some twenty kilometres distant, to the south of Sydney.

Broughton had been a 'company town', developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money had been spent as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).

However, this posting to Broughton was not to last longer than just over two months: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a *Nova Scotia Highland Brigade* to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled to train together at *Camp Aldershot*, Nova Scotia, where the *Brigade* then spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for *overseas service*.

At seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, the one-thousand thirty-eight officers and *other ranks* of the 185th Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in Halifax harbour. Earlier that day the 85th and the 188th Battalions had gone on board, to be followed on the morrow by the 219th and the 193rd.

(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915.* – from a photograph from the *Imperial War Museum, London*)

On October 13th - at about eleven o'clock in the morning - it was the turn of the half-battalion of the 166th – five-hundred three *all ranks* - the final unit, to march up the gangways before *Olympic* cast her lines and sailed towards the open sea. For this trans-Atlantic passage she was carrying some six-thousand five-hundred military personnel.

The vessel docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 19, six days later, and the troops disembarked on that same day. The 185th Battalion was thereupon transported south-eastwards to *Witley Camp* in the county of Surrey.

Apart from having been a time of training, the period spent at *Camp Aldershot had also been the occasion to dictate his will before leaving for *overseas service*. Private Penny did so on August 24, in a document leaving everything to his mother; then it was also to be two weeks before taking passage to the United Kingdom that, On October 1, he chose to allocate a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay, this also to his mother.**

This, as noted above, was Camp Aldershot in Nova Scotia. At least two further camps of the same name were associated with Canadian troops during the Great War: the major British establishment in the southern county of Hampshire; and the one created during the early days of the Great War just on the northern side of the Franco-Belgian frontier in the vicinity of the town of Nieppe.

If it was Private Penny who marched up the gang-plank onto Olympic on October 12, it was (Acting) Lance Corporal Penny – with pay* - who disembarked upon arrival at Liverpool, his personal papers recording the date of this first promotion as October 13.

In many instances, payment for service in an 'acting' rank was not necessarily the case.

The 185th Battalion is documented as having provided re-enforcements for Canadian forces on the Continent until February of 1918 when it was absorbed by the 17th (*Reserve*) Battalion. It was on May 27 of 1917 that the once-again Private Penny* was transferred on paper to the nominal roll of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) and then by ship across the English Channel to France.

It had been only days before sailing to the Continent, on May 18, that Lance Corporal Penny had requested permission to revert to the rank of private. It may well be, as it was with others, that he had been overlooked for service on the Continent and, wishing to see active service, could not do so in his rank of non-commissioned officer, but only as a private soldier.

On May 28 he was *taken on strength* by his new unit. However, as was the case by then with all re-enforcements arriving from the United Kingdom to France, he reported to a Base Depot, in his case to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Base Depot, established by that time in proximity to the French coastal town of Étaples. The Base Depot War Diary, however, records no newcomers on that date – but *does* for May 29 when it documents…*954 men arrived from England*…

He may well have been *taken on strength* on May 28, but Private Penny was not to report *to duty* with his new unit until August, three months afterwards. Instead, on June 15 he was despatched to the 2nd Entrenching Battalion*, in the vicinity of Hersin at the time. It was a large detachment of two-hundred forty-one re-enforcements which arrived there on the next day, June 16, to be eventually destined for five different infantry battalions already serving at the front. One-hundred sixteen of them – including Private Penny – would apparently eventually be forwarded to the 25th 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 re-enforcement 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*)

What exactly were to be his duties for the following month with the 2nd Entrenching Battalion is not to be found among Private Penny's files. However, they do reveal that on July 15 he was…*On duty with the Can. Corps Tramways Coy*…before receiving promotion on a second occasion, this time to the rank of (acting) corporal – with pay – on August 7.

However, once more, and again without any explanation other than it was his own choice, on August 22, at the time of his reporting to the 25th Battalion (see below), he reverted to the rank of private soldier.

Meanwhile, after his appointment as corporal, Private Penny was now to spend only two further weeks with the 2nd Entrenching Battalion before he was ordered despatched to serve with the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) in the field. The date on which he *departed* from the former unit appears not to be recorded – it was possibly on August 20 - but a draft of seventy-nine *other ranks is* documented as having re-enforced the 25th Battalion on that August 21-22, 1917.

(Right above: *Re-enforcements for an unidentified Canadian Scottish battalion, led by their pipers, on the march to the forward area in the north of France at some time during the winter of 1918* – from *Le Miroir*)

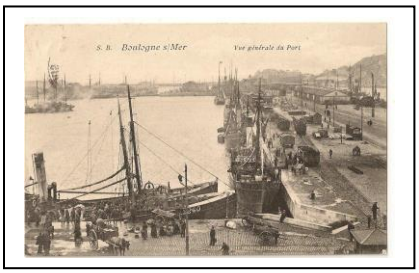
*** * * * ***

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some thirty months by the time of Private McIsaac's arrival, since mid-September of the year, 1915. The Battalion was a component of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, and it had been in service on the Continent continuously since its arrival on the *Western Front.*

(continued)

(Right above: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including and Empire (Commonwealth). This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet*. – from a vintage post-card)

Only days after having passed through the port of Folkestone and its French counterpart, Boulogne, on September 22 the 25th Battalion was to take over trenches from the 2nd Battalion of *The King's Own* in the *Kingdom of Belgium*. This was in the areas forward from the communities of Locre and Kemmel, in that small part of the country which had not by then been occupied by the Germans, and to the south of the already-battered medieval city of Ypres.



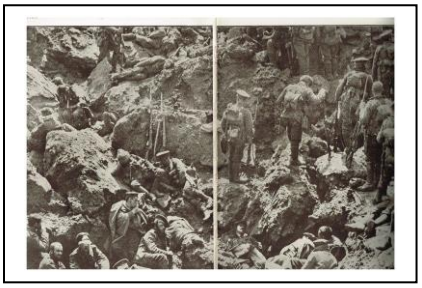
(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

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

(Right: *A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres as early as 1915 – the city is described as 'morte' (dead) - before the arrival of Private Penny* – from *Illustration*)

The 25th Battalion was to remain in these sectors until August of the following year, 1916.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It had been at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines beneath the German lines and then had followed up with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.



However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, had greeted the newcomers who were to take over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

Towards the end of that confrontation, on April 13-14, the 25th Battalion had relieved another Canadian unit in craters and new trenches, and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date.

(Preceding page: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector* – from *Illustration*)

Six weeks later, in early June, the Battalion had then been involved in the fighting in the area of *Mount Sorrel*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Maple Copse*, in the so-called *Ypres Salient* and just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division was apparently to play a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle-honour won by the unit during the *Great War*.

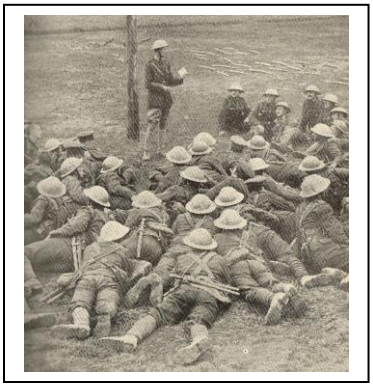
(Right above: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres* (*today Ieper*) *whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance* – photograph from 1914)

(Right: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government.* – photograph from 2014)

From the middle of June up until August of 1916, 20, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.

(Right: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel* – photograph from 2014)

Some two weeks later, on the 27th, the unit had been withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moulle.



The following week at Moulle would be spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly according to plan.

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 was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

(Preceding page: *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*)

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 being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

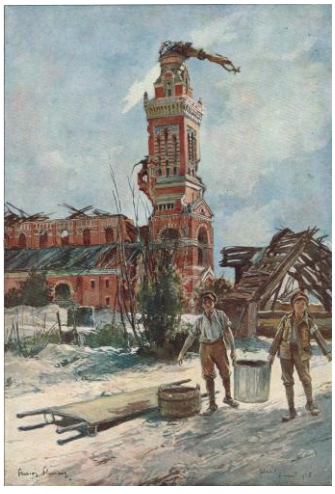
As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), had been brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians had entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

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

Meanwhile, on the evening of September 10, the 25th Battalion had arrived at the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields* (*La Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

On September 14 the Battalion had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning again, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers working, carrying water in the centre of Albert, the town's already-damaged basilica in the background* – from *Illustration*)



Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 15, 1916: *5th Brigade attacked and captured the Town of Courcelette… the 25th Battalion moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver…*

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who had gone *over the top* on the day of the assault, the 25th Battalion War Diarist was to record thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action.**

It seems that some of the missing may have soon returned to duty as a later War Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.

(continued)

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

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred (sic) all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture "at all costs" enemy trenched known as KENORA and REGINA…* "B", "C" and "D" Companies… *were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left… and about thirty men…*

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right: *Ninety-eight years later on, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery* – photograph from 2014)

(Right below: *Wounded at the Somme transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention* – from *Le Miroir*)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and had made its way westwards and then northwards. It had subsequently passed to the west of the battered city of Arras and beyond, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. There the unit was to remain for the following six months, in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay Angres and Bruay.

(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*)

That winter of 1916-1917 was to be one of relative calm, allowing the 25th Battalion – and many others - to return to the everyday rigours and routines of trench warfare*; after *the Somme* it had perhaps been a welcome respite.

There was to be little if any concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raids by both sides. The medical facilities during this period were to be kept much more busy by cases of sickness and dental problems than by the numbers of wounded in need of treatment.

(continued)

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

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 the year 1916, by that time equipped with steel helmets and the less visible, British-made, Lee-Enfield rifles* – from *Illustration*)

Towards the end of the month of March, on the 23rd, the Battalion had been withdrawn well to the rear, to Maisnil-Bouche, there to undergo intensive training. The exercises were to last until, and including, April 7, only two days before that training was to become the real thing. On the final five days, April 2-7, the unit had been sent to become familiar with ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked.

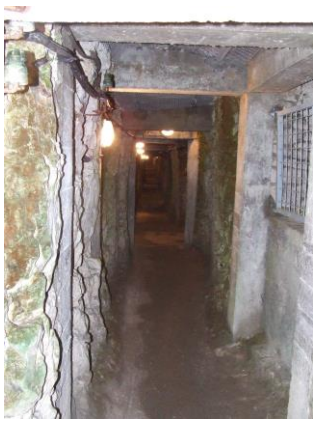
On April 8… *Battalion less 1 platoon per company moved from MAISNIL BOUCHE to concentration area at BOIS DES ALLEUX. In the evening the Battalion moved up to its position…via cross country route*… (25th Battalion War Diary). It apparently was not to pass via those well-documented tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

On April 9 in that spring of 1917, the British Army had 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 having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

While the British campaign had proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *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, autonomous entity, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.



The 2nd Canadian Division had not been 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 Battalion's objectives were apparently soon to be captured and much of the remainder of the day had been spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

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

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd 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*)

(Right below: *Canadians under shell-fire occupying the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was to be fought under the same conditions*. – from *Illustration*)

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

There had been, on those first days of April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted, and highly unlikely, *breakthrough* – but such a follow-up of the previous day's success had proved to be logistically impossible, the weather having prevented any swift movement of guns and material.

Thus the Germans had been gifted the time to close the breech and the conflict once more was to revert to one of inertia.

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

Nor was the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* 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. At the time that the *Battle of Arras* officially drew to its conclusion, the 25th Battalion had been withdrawn into reserve, resting and training – if that is not a contradiction – in the area of the community of Gouy-Servins, west of the city of Lens.

Now there were to be several weeks before a return to the forward area. Excerpts from 25th Battalion War diaries of July 2 and 3, 1917: *Battalion at BOUVIGNY HUTS. Preparations to relieve 46th British Division, 138th. and 137th. British Brigades, 1/5 Battalion Leicesters and 1/4 Battalion Leicesters. Casualties, 1 Other Rank killed, 9 Other Ranks wounded.*

***Relief completed about 2 a.m.* – No further casualties were to be documented for the remainder of the day. Thus it was back to business as usual.**

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

The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

(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*)

One of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

(Right above: *Canadian troops advancing 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.

(Preceding page: *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)

Yet *Hill 70* was high enough to have been considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – as the key feature in the area, its capture more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

Objectives had been 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 had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

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

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

Of course, the Germans were not the only ones to incur casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion retired on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed*, *wounded* and *missing in action*, fifty of which were apparently incurred on that August 17.

(Right: *The spoils of war: Canadian officers and men on some of the terrain on which they had recently fought – and captured* – from *Le Miroir*)

While it may have retired temporarily from front-line positions on August 17, the respite was to last not even a day – and the unit had incurred casualties even while withdrawing into those support positions. On August 18 the Battalion War Diarist was reporting a unit *trench strength* of just fifteen officers and three-hundred seventy-five *other ranks*.

On the night of August 20-21, the 25th Battalion relieved the 22nd Battalion in the front line, still in the area of the Cité St-Laurent*. And while the once-more *Private* Penny and his draft reported to the area of Gouy Servins where the unit was to be billeted following its next relief, the fighting companies of the 25th Battalion were still in action.

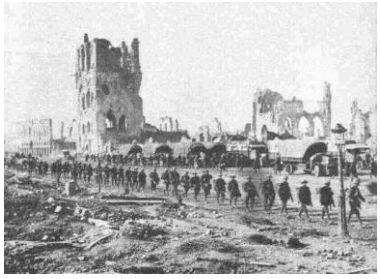
The many pit-heads and their neighbourhoods surrounding the mining-centre and city of Lens were often designated by the term Cité followed by the name of a saint.

Relieved on the night of August 21-22, the depleted ranks of Private Penny's new unit retired on foot and by bus to the afore-mentioned community of Gouy-Servins. To the casualty count of August 17, a further seventy could now be added. The seventy-nine re-enforcements of Private Penny's detachment were to be a most welcome – and most necessary – addition.

*** * * * ***

After the weeks of relatively little infantry activity during the early days of that summer of 1917, the attack on August 15 in the area of *Hill 70* and the city of Lens had apparently been intended as the precursor to further weeks of an entire campaign spear-headed by the Canadians.

However, the British offensive further to the north, in Belgium, was proceeding less well than intended and the Canadians were to be needed there. Activities in the *Lens Sector* were suspended in early September and for a short period, Private Penny's 25th Battalion was to revert to those rigours and routines of trench warfare.



It was not to be until the final weeks of the month of October that the Canadians became embroiled in the British summer – and then autumn - offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was – *ostensibly* - one of the British High Command's objectives.

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

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

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

The strength of the 25th Battalion on that November 5 was reported as being twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-six other ranks, perhaps some sixty per cent of the regulation peace-time number.

(Right: *The Canadian Memorial standing on Passchendaele Ridge, at the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village* – photograph from 2015)

During the three days that the unit was to spend at the front at this time, the casualties sustained by the 25th Battalion were, by comparison to those incurred by others, fairly light: seventeen *killed in action*, sixty-seven *wounded* and six *missing in action*.

(continued)

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers on the Passchendaele Front using a shell-hole to perform their ablutions* – from *Le Miroir*)

In the late evening of November 8 the 25th Battalion was withdrawn from the area of the front line, to the south of Ypres itself. About a month later again, on or about December 12, and after having voted in the Canadian General Election, the unit had been ordered southward again, to Villers-au-Bois, not many kilometres distant from - and to the west of the area of Vimy.

On Christmas Eve of 1917 Private Penny received what he may well have regarded as a welcome present: he was granted a fourteen-day period of leave in France. Where exactly it was that he spent this period – although one may surmise that it was in Paris – is not documented. All that appears in the files is the report that he re-joined the 25th Battalion in the field on January 8 of the New Year, 1918.

The winter of 1917-1918 was now to be spent in the same area; little if any confrontational military activity for that period is reported in the Battalion War Diary. What *does* appear in his dossier is that Private Penny was awarded a first Good Conduct Badge* on March 16.

In the form of a chevron worn like an upside-down NCO's stripe, it was awarded to those other ranks who had accumulated no misdemeanours during two years of service. Further periods of unblemished behaviour were rewarded by further chevrons.

A single week after this award, on March 23 – and two days following the first day of spring - the unit was moved further south once more, on this occasion to the area of St-Aubin on the outskirts of Arras, to arrive there on the 24th. The Battalion was then '*standing-by*', ready to move on short notice, owing to expectations of an attack by the enemy.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the enemy launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21. The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there where they were adjacent to French forces.

(Right above: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British and the Canadians uncertain about their intentions and to oblige them to retain troops in the area*. – from *Le Miroir*)

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

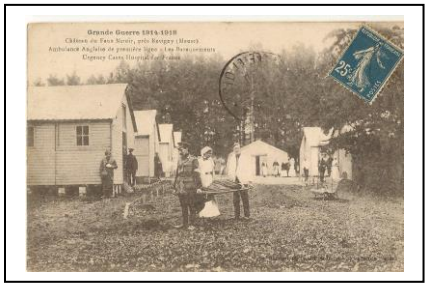
A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918* – from *Illustration*)

The War Diary suggests, however, that the 25th Battalion was not involved in the heaviest – if any - of the related fighting. The unit posted mostly near Wailly, just to the south-west of the city of Arras, the majority of the casualties incurred were due – as they often were - to enemy artillery activity rather than to infantry action.

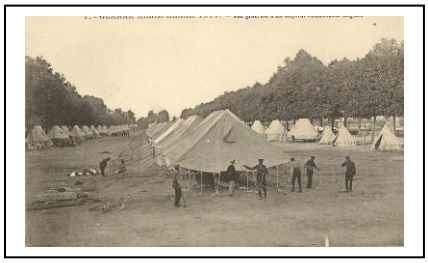
(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery* – from a vintage post-card)

By the end of April the Battalion officers appear to have had nothing more important to discuss than whether or not to adopt the kilt as part of the regimental uniform.



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

And also by the end of that same April, Private Penny had been in and out of hospital. Admitted sick into an unidentified field ambulance on the 22nd of the month, he was on the 23rd transferred to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance before being forwarded later that day for medical attention to *dental carries* to the 3rd Canadian Casualty Station. From there it was six days before he was released to re-join his unit on April 29. He reported there on the morrow.



The 6th Canadian Field Ambulance was stationed at the time at Bretencourt, to the west of Arras, and the 3rd Canadian Casualty Station was at Ligny-sur-Canche, likewise to the west of Arras.

(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)

By that time a relative calm had descended on the front as the German threat had faded – the enemy had won a great deal of ground, but had gained nothing of any military significance on either of the two fronts. Nor was the calm particularly surprising: both sides were exhausted and needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible in these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

The Allies from this point of view were a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had two empires to draw from and the Americans were belatedly arriving on the scene.

An overall Allied Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was setting about organizing a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

The 25th Battalion and Private Penny remained in the same area to the south of Arras after the crisis, the months of May and June to be spent in relative calm in the vicinity of Neuville-Vitasse; July was likely even calmer as the unit was withdrawn further back to Bellacourt.

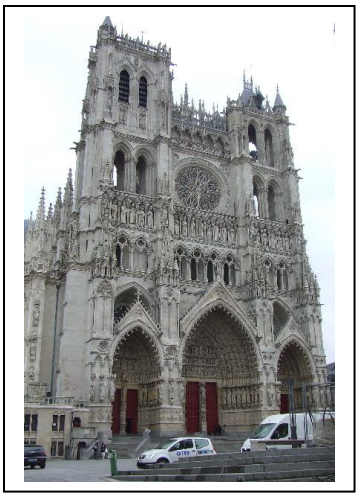
(Right: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918.* – photograph from the *Wikipedia* web-site)

For Private Penny, however, that relative calm of mid-June was punctuated by a further interruption for medical treatment.

On June 14, according to the Battalion War Diarist…*Weather fine. Situation quiet. The Army Commander, General Sir Julian BYNG wired his congratulations on the successful raid.* On the day preceding a party of one-hundred forty-six all ranks had raided an enemy outpost line which not only Sir Julian but the War Diarist felt to have been a complete success. Whether Private Penny had participated in the venture or not is not recorded among his documents.

The War Diary entry for June 14 continues: *The usual patrols were out, but nothing unusual to report. The garrison worked hard on the trenches, deepening and repairing, during the night.*

Casualties – 1 O.R. wounded.

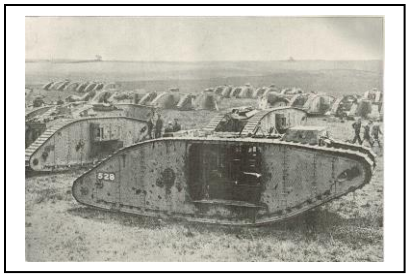


That single *other rank* was Private Penny who had incurred a slight injury to his head and face – no further details are documented - for which he had been evacuated to the 5th Canadian Field Ambulance at Gouy-en-Artois. The wound was apparently deemed to be treatable at the field ambulance and he had been discharged back to his battalion three days after his admission.

Days before August 8, the intended date of the start of the Allied offensive, the 25th Battalion was transferred to Bois de Blangy, just to the east of Amiens, and on the main road from there to St-Quentin, from where it then moved forward into the trenches.

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

The 25th Battalion was not alone: a large number of other Canadian units – indeed the entire Canadian Corps – had at that time begun to move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west of Amiens, then south, then east again to finish in front of the city. This movement was to be effected in only a matter of days, all of the latter stages of it on foot, and these also during the hours of darkness.



It was intended to surprise the enemy – and it did.

(Right: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which became ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'* – from *Illustration*)

At 4.30 in the morning on that August 8, the advance began – *the Hundred Days* as it became known - which was to bring the *Great War* to a close on November 11. The Canadians were to move forward some twenty kilometres in the first three days of the offensive, a feat unheard of since the autumn of 1914 when the opposing forces had settled into four years of trench stalemate*.

The only exceptions to this rule having been the opening day of the First Battle of Cambrai, November 20, 1917, and the German advance in that March of 1918.

(Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry of August 8, 1918) *The weather was greatly in our favour, a thick mist hung over the ground. At 4.20 a.m. our Artillery opened as one gun, our counter-Battery work was especially good, the enemy artillery being forced to cease in half an hour, scarcely a shell falling in our trenches. The plan of the attack was as follows:- …the 5th Cdn. Inf. Bde. moved up at ZERO plus 1 hour, in artillery formation and formed up on the consolidated line with the 24th Canadian Battalion on the left, 26th Cdn. Battalion on the right, 25th Canadian Battalion in support and the 22nd Canadian Battalion in reserve, the objective being about 1000 yards in advance of GUILLACOURT, which was successfully reached and consolidated about noon, the general line of advance was parallel to the AMIENS-CHAULNES Railway… The mist was so thick that it was impossible to proceed other than by compass, this method was also difficult at times owing to the obscurity of all land marks. Strong opposition from enemy machine gun nests encountered…but were all attended to in quick time… The work of the tanks was also especially good in destroying enemy machine gun nests… At 6 p.m. the 6th Cdn. Inf. Bde. passed through us, together with Cavalry Patrols, exploiting the success. The Battalion remained on the consolidated line until next day.*

The casualties incurred by the 25th Battalion on this first day of the *Battle of Amiens* were eight killed, one-hundred seven wounded and three missing – *all ranks*.

On the next day the attack was pursued, the 5th Brigade War Diary – of which the 25th Battalion was a component - reporting that…*The attack was entirely successful, VRELY was taken and many prisoners.*

(continued)

On the following day again, August 10, the 4th Canadian Division passed through the 2nd Canadian Division and the 25th Battalion was now to remain in the vicinity of the small community of Méharicourt until the night of August 15-16 when it in turn moved up to relieve elements of the 20th and 21st Battalions in the forward area in front of Chilly.

The advance was by now slowing, the enemy resistance becoming more resolute and the Allied logistics having trouble in keeping up with the rapid and unexpected rate of the advance. There was also the fact that, by this time, the first Canadian units were beginning to be withdrawn from this theatre of battle.

(Right below: *Canadian troops among the debris of the re-captured Albert on or about August 22, 1918* – from *Le Miroir*)

It was not only the 25th Battalion but, once more, it was the entire Canadian Corps which was to be involved. Following in reverse the same systems and itineraries of three-four weeks previously, and again in a matter of days, the four Canadian Divisions were to be back on the *Arras Front* before the end of August – in time for a further offensive.

On the *Amiens Front*, French forces were to replace the now-vanishing Canadians.

Foch - named earlier that year as the Supreme Commander of Allied (French, British, Commonwealth and Belgian) Forces on the Western Front - was intent on keeping pressure on the Germans by attacking on several fronts. After the assault to the east of Amiens, now a French responsibility, there was straightaway to be another along the Arras-Cambrai road axis – and the same Canadian Corps was again to be heavily involved.

The commune of Beaurains in the outskirts of Arras had been chosen as the assembly point for the Canadian 5th Infantry Brigade, one of whose four battalions was, as previously noted, Private Penny's 25th.

Meanwhile, back on the night of August 16-17, two companies of the Battalion had been relieved for a final time to withdraw to the area of Vrely from where, joined by the other two companies, the unit had moved further to the rear, to Caix, during the night of the 17-18.

(Right below: *French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix, just to the west of Rosières: Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground*. – photograph from 2017)

At Caix the unit had passed the morrow, and most of the day following, in…*cleaning up and resting. Clothing, pay and bathing parades were also held during the day… Rifle and respirator inspections were held during the morning* (of the 19th). *At 9 p.m. the Battalion formed up and marched to BLANGY WOOD, arriving at 4.10 a.m. and settled in bivouacs*. (Excerpts from 25th Battalion War Diary entries for August 18 and 19, 1918.)

(continued)

Not only had the itineraries of the Canadians' coming in early August to the field in front of Amiens been used for their return to Arras, but so also had been the same cloak of secrecy, all troop movements having been made under cover of darkness.

Busses were to take Private Penny's unit on the following evening, August 20, to Herlin-le-Sec from where it had marched the remaining three kilometres on that same night to Maisnil-les-Saint-Pol. It had rested there all the next day before having moved again on the morrow, August 22: the War Diary records that the journey was made on foot from Hauteville to Petit Houvain; from Petit Houvain(?) by train to Marœuil; and again on foot from Marœuil to Fosseux.

A further march to Warlus on August 23 had been followed by yet another just two days later, a walk which had seen the 25th Battalion arrive just after midnight of August 24-25 at Beaurains where the other three battalions of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade were also to assemble (see above).

Seeking its next orders…*the Commanding Officer and the Adjutant proceeded to Bde. H.Q. at RONVILLE CAVE…at 2 a.m. but could get no definite information re attack, except that ZERO HOUR would be 3 a.m.* (Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry of August 26, 1918).

As it transpired, this information – but only that of the timing of *Zero Hour* - was to prove to be incorrect: the offensive was still to go ahead.

(Right: *One of the several entrances into the Ronville Cave system, almost a century after its use by Commonwealth and British troops. It was used at different times by personnel of thirty-six different Army Divisions*. – photograph from 2012(?))

Later on during that day of August 26, the 25th Battalion moved forwards into a reserve position, perhaps because the unit's numbers were by then only one-half of regular battalion strength. The attack had already gone in at several sectors at three o'clock in the morning of that same day, but the assault by the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade was not due to be delivered until the morning of August 27.

For the next two days the unit moved forward, individual companies supporting other units as and when events necessitated. Progress at times was slow, German snipers and machine-gunners proving to be, as ever, formidable opponents, and the enemy artillery was still very active. Despite all their efforts, several objectives of the 2nd Division still remained contested as this offensive, the *Battle of the Scarpe*, drew to its conclusion. It had cost the Canadian Corps some fifty-six hundred casualties.

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

On August 29 the 25th Battalion withdrew all the way to Achicourt, there to be treated with hot meals, dry socks and, on the evening of the 30th, a concert.

(Right: *A group of German prisoners, some serving here as stretcher-bearers, being taken to the rear after their capture by Canadian troops: a tank may be seen in the background* – from *Le Miroir*)

The first five days of the offensive had succeeded in overcoming the German defences to a depth of eight kilometres – overrunning the battlefields of 1917 - and thus, despite the several set-backs, was to be considered a great success. It had laid the foundation for the next operation. After a two-day respite the advance would be re-launched to reduce the enemy positions on the Drocourt-Quéant Line, but on this occasion by troops of different Canadian and British divisions.

SIR DOUGLAS HAIG FÉLICITE DES CANADIENS QUI SE SIGNALÈRENT A LA PRISE DE QUÉANT

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

It was not until September 14 that the services of Private Penney's 25th Battalion were once more required in the forward area. Until then the unit had remained withdrawn, mostly undergoing training, although at times not so far back as to escape injuries from enemy artillery. Even now, things remained relatively quiet while preparations continued to be laid for the assault on and the crossing of the *Canal du Nord*.

During two weeks of that September, Private Penney had been sent to the 1st Army Rest Camp. No reason is cited but perhaps none is needed as the reason is evident. He then returned once more to the 25th Battalion on September 19.

September 27 was the date on which the Canadians attacked and traversed the *Canal du Nord*, then pursued the Germans through the area of *Bourlon Wood* in the direction of the historic town of Cambrai.

(Right above: *German prisoners evacuating wounded out of the area of the unfinished part of the Canal du Nord which the Canadians crossed on September 27, thus opening the road to Cambrai* – from *Le Miroir*)

(Right above: *The same area of the Canal du Nord as it is almost a century after the Canadian operation to cross it* – photograph from 2015)

(continued)

(Right: *Two German field-guns of Great War vintage stand on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City, the one in the foreground captured during the fighting at Bourlon Wood.* – photograph from 2016)

(Right below: *German prisoners, some wounded, taken during the advance in October of 1918, in the company of their Canadian captors* – from *Le Miroir*)

Extract of Operational Order 275 as pertaining to the 2nd Canadian Division and as issued on October 8, 1918: *The 2nd Canadian Division has been ordered to secure the passage of the Canal de L'ESCAUT* between RAMILLIES and MORENCHIES, both inclusive, and to advance its Right Flank to gain touch with troops of the XVII Corps East of CAMBRAI ANNEXE Station.*

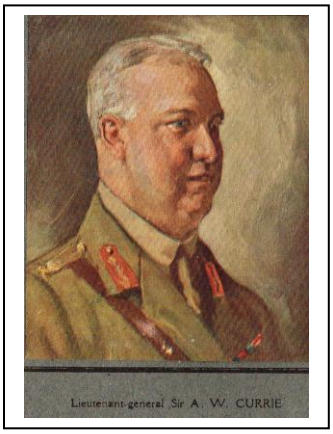
This operation will not be begun until information has been received from Canadian Corps that the XVII Corps has secured the whole of the NIERGNIES-AWOINGT Spur…

…The objectives of the 5th C.I. Bde. shall include MORENCHIES Wood, the road junction at A.6.a.O.2., the CAMBRAI-IWUY Railway…the village of ESCAUDOEUVRES and the chateau in T.19.c.

Extract from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry of October 9, 1918: *Oct. 9th At 0130 in accordance with O.O.No.295, the Battalion attacked the CANAL DE L'ESCAUT. "C" and "D" Companies establishing bridgeheads at 3.24.d.6.7. and 3.30.a.8.5. "A" and "B" Coys. continued the attack and reached their objective in short time and consolidated their positions.*

Patrols were sent out to exploit the success and later the Cavalry went forward. The ground exploited by the Cavalry was consolidated by the Battalion during the afternoon and evening.

Weather fair. Casualties – 15 O.R. killed and 85 O.R. wounded.



****The Canal de L'Escaut, upon reaching the outskirts of the town, runs north-south through the western side of the town, perpendicular to the direction of the Canadian advance.***

(Right above: *Canadian cavalry, little used during the war up until this period, escorting German prisoners towards the rear as infantrymen look on* – from *Le Miroir*)

On October 14, having thus remained in the forward area for a further five days – no infantry action reported but another nine *killed in action* and ten *wounded all ranks* – the Battalion retired to the vicinity of Tilloy to withdraw again on the next day to Marquion.

(Preceding page: *Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur William Currie, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps* – from *Illustration*)

There Private Penny's unit was to find clean clothes, pay, rifle and respirator – gas mask – inspections and a bath before commencing a day of training before a visit, and the inevitable accompanying inspection, by the Canadian Corps Commander.

On October 20 the 25th Battalion proceeded to move forward once again, on this occasion a three-day operation before it arrived at Villers au Tertre on the 23rd - plus another twenty-four hours to reach Auberchicourt. Still behind the front, this was to be the area in which the unit was to remain in training for twelve days, until the afternoon of November 5.

It thereupon received orders to move up towards the Franco-Belgian frontier, to St-Saulve, where the Private Penny and his comrades-in-arms were to spend the night in a convent.

On the next day the unit was reported as having entered Rombies, still in France…*relieving the 102nd Canadian Battalion, in front line. Relief was completed in daylight, there being no enemy in sight*. (Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry of November 6, 1918.)

(Right: *The advance through northern France and into Belgium by Canadian and British forces continues during the autumn of 1918*. – from *Illustration*)

The Battalion then apparently crossed the border into Belgium early the next day.

(Excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary entry of November 7, 1918) *…At 0800 hours, the Battalion advanced through BAISEUX and ÉLOUGES, and took up a position on outskirts of latter village. Little opposition was encountered but great difficulty was experienced crossing the Canal, as the bridges had been blown by the enemy*.

Our casualties were – 8 Officers wounded, 10 O.R. killed and 41 wounded.

Just four days after the death of Private Penney, at eleven o'clock in the morning of November 11, 1918, the final armistice of the *Great War* took effect and the fighting ceased.

(Right above: *The sacrifice of Mark Penny is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the community of Holyrood*. – photograph from 2010)

Casualty report: *Killed in Action - Was guiding his Platoon in an attack South West of Elouges, and just as they reached the final objective, he was hit by an enemy sniper's bullet and killed.*

(continued)

(Preceding page: *A family monument which stands in Kennedy's Road Cemetery in Holyrood, commemorates the life of Private Matthew Penny*. – photograph from 2015)

The son of Mark Penny, farmer, and of Bridget Penny (née *Costello*) of North Farm, Woodford Station, Holyrood, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Mary-Margaret, Honora, Julia, John-Gregory, to Edward-Frederic and to Hanora-Christiana (died aged one month)*.

Matthew L. Penny had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years: date of birth at Holyrood, Newfoundland, January 6, 1897. However a further source – and also the family headstone – cites his age at the time of his death as being twenty-four years.

Private Matthew L. Penny was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

This family information a propos Matthew Penny's family is from the Holyroodgen.net.

Private Penny was decorated with the Military Medal for his services (see below). There appears on the relevant citation card only the date of the episode for which the award was made: June 25, 1918. No other source offers any further details.

War Office
21st *October*, 1918

His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Military Medal for bravery in the Field to the under-mentioned Non-commissioned Officers and Men:-

877589 Private M. Penny, N. Scotia R.

(*London Gazette, October 18, 1918, Supplement Number 30962, Page 12420*)

The 25th Battalion War Diary appears to offer no further information. The entry for June 25, 1918, reads as follows: *Weather fine. Situation quiet. The usual patrols were out during the night but had nothing of interest to report. Considerable wire was put out along our front during the night, and the garrison worked cleaning and deepening trenches.*

Casualties – 1 O.R. killed and 1 O.R. wounded

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.