

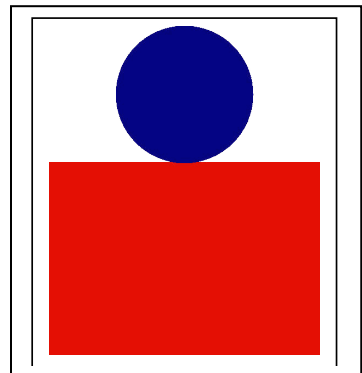


**Private John Cecil Pilot (Number 48585) of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in La Targette\* British Cemetery, Neuville-St-Vaast: Grave reference II.D.4.**

**(Right: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.*)**

**\*Formerly known as Aux-Rietz Cemetery**

**(continued)**



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a farmer, John Cecil Pilot was likely the young man – Master John Pilot - who was accompanying his mother on October 26 of 1911 on board the steamship *Ivermore* from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney, Cape Breton, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. They were on their way to Montréal.

By the time of her travels on the *Ivermore*, Barbara Pilot\* had been widowed and then married – some sources cite November 3, 1910, as the date - to Maurice Galbraith Cullen, the artist, who was also originally from Newfoundland although he had long before made Montréal his home. Barbara and her five children thereafter went to live in that city.

*\*The passenger list of October 26, 1911, despite her recent re-marriage, still documents her as Mrs. E. Pilot.*

John Cecil Pilot had already served in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery of the Canadian Militia by the time that he presented himself in Montréal for enlistment, but the date on which he did so appears to be somewhat unclear. His papers record both October 18 and 30 as the day on which he attested; that he underwent a medical examination on October 18 appears to be unanimous – but further down the page the same report then goes on to record October 18 as the date of his enlistment before crossing it out to replace it with October 30.

Other papers simply cite October, 1914, or else have been left blank.

Perhaps the exact date is not of extreme importance: the unit that he joined at that time was the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps, 1<sup>st</sup> Section, with which the now-Trooper Pilot was to serve during the following fifteen months.

Unfortunately his personal files do not comprise the history of his activities during the first period of the conflict. All that may be said with certitude is that by the beginning of the year 1916 he was serving with the Number 1 Canadian Veterinary Hospital based in the vicinity of the French industrial port-city of Le Havre. Therefore it may well be that it was with this unit that he served from 1914 up until this time.

Therefore, what follows is a brief record of the No. 1 Canadian Veterinary Hospital from November of 1914 until January, 1916.

The Hospital was mobilized in Montréal on October 18, 1914, to be placed under under the command of a Captain T.C. Davis. Nineteen days later it had embarked onto the SS – later His Majesty's Troopship – *Megantic* for the trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.



The vessel arrived – likely in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport – ten days later whereupon the unit was despatched to the area of Netheravon in the county of Wiltshire, a centre being used by – not too surprisingly – an Army Cavalry School.

(Right above: *The photograph of the SS Megantic is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

On April 2 on 1915 the entire 1<sup>st</sup> Section of the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps\* - formerly the No. 1 Canadian Veterinary Hospital – entrained for the journey to the Southampton Docks. There its one-hundred ninety-six all ranks, fourteen horses, five waggons plus baggage, boarded ships, to sit in the harbour all night, before setting sail for France on the following day.

*\*Designated thus on December 12, 1914.*

Early in the morning of April 4 the company disembarked in the port of Le Havre to be ordered to the Number 7 Camp of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Veterinary Corps\*. It was then to be a further three days before it was allotted its own quarters, in the Mange\*\* Hospital, also under the auspices of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Veterinary Corps.



*\*This surely must have been a British Army establishment.*

*\*\*A painful skin disorder to which horses are prone.*

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

On April 9 the order was received to once again designate the unit as the Number 1 (Canadian) Veterinary Hospital. On that same day the Hospital received the plans for the buildings which were now to be erected on the site before, on the morrow, the personnel began to treat its first patients: five-hundred twenty-nine horses and mules already on site and all suffering from skin disorders.

The Hospital War Diarist, in his entry of April 10, describes a desolate scene which the Canadian newcomers had to face – and to ameliorate: *All cases “skin”. They are all treated and are none too good looking. The sheds are wood with brick floors in two or three. Horses are secured by head and heel ropes secured to ground lines attached to pegs driven into the ground. Heel shackles were evidently seldom removed as on removing the shackles the hair was worn away. This was accounted for by virtue of the fact that owing to shortage of water the horses had to be watered by buckets. This was a serious disadvantage afterwards overcome by erection of horse-troughts (sic) at a lower level near the road where sufficient ??? of water could be obtained for all purposes.*

*There is much bricking to be done as several of the stables are in a poor condition, the floors being full of holes. Everything being clay around as a very little moisture creates much mud. Cookhouse for men is outside very close to a huge manure pile. There is absolutely nothing here except the sheds. The blacksmith shop is in a tumble-down condition being built of old pieces of board. The horses are shot outside...*



(Right above: *An Army (British) forge and blacksmith shop just prior to the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(continued)



Some nine months later, on a paper dated January 15, 1916, Trooper Pilot submitted the following request: *...desirous of being transferred from the Canadian Vet. Hospital, C.A.V.C. at...Havre...to the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Canadian Infantry Regiment or Corps at...1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division...for the purpose of...proceeding to the front.*

It appears to have been a further month before that request – uncontested by the Hospital’s administration – by Trooper Pilot – described as an...*exemplary soldier...*by his former commanding officer – was acted upon and he was *taken on strength* by the Canadian Base Depot, also at Le Havre, there to await orders to join his new unit. Now designated as Private Pilot, he was despatched from there on February 29 – 1916 was a leap year – and reported *to duty* with the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) four days later.

Late in the evening of that March 4 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be found stationed in southern Belgium, in the *Ploegsteert Sector*. Earlier on same that day it had finished a tour in the forward area, had been relieved and had subsequently moved back into the Divisional Reserve area, in the vicinity of the community of Kortepyp on the Franco-Belgian frontier. Although the Battalion War Diarist appears to make no mention of any re-enforcements arriving on that day, according to his own records, this was the time and place that Private Pilot did so.



(Right above: *Nondescript countryside just to the west of Kortepyp but just on the French side of the border – photograph from 2010*)

\* \* \* \* \*

The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division\*. In mid-October of 1914 the Division had been the first force to arrive in Canada from the United Kingdom and then had been the first Canadian unit to set foot on French soil which it had done in February of 1915.



*\*Until the time that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division was formed, it was simply referred to as the Canadian Division.*

(Right above: *The personnel of the Battalion wore a Black Watch tartan kilt, one version of which is shown here. – from the [canadiansoldiers.com](http://canadiansoldiers.com) web-site*)

(Right: *The caption reads merely ‘Camp of Canadians’ but it is from the early days of the Great War, thus likely in either northern France or in Belgium. The troops are presumably from a Canadian-Scottish unit as they are wearing kilts. – from a vintage post-card*)



For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division had been posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. In mid-April the Division, moving north from France into the *Kingdom of Belgium*, was eventually to take up positions in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the *Great War*. However, for those first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the area had been relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion had begun to fit into the rigours, the routines – and the 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, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



*Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.*

*(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)*

The Division had moved into the *Ypres Salient* just after mid-April. Some units were not even *in situ* when, only days later, the dam broke - although it was gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it. The date was April 22, 1915.



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

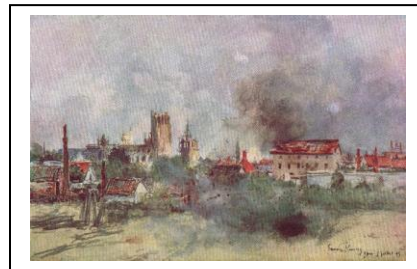
The *2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Ypres* saw the first use of chlorine gas by the Germans during the *Great War*. Later to become an everyday event, and with the introduction of protective measures such as advanced gas-masks, the gas was to prove no more dangerous than the rest of the military arsenals of the warring nations. But on this first occasion, to inexperienced troops without the means to combat it, the yellow-green cloud of chlorine proved overwhelming.



(continued)

**(Preceding page: *The very first protection against gas was to urinate on a handkerchief which was then held over the nose and mouth. However, all the armies were soon producing gas-masks, some of the first of which are seen here being tested by Scottish troops. – from either *Illustration* or *Le Miroir**)**

The cloud was noticed at five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22. In the sector subjected to the most concentrated use of the gas, the French Colonial troops to the Canadian left wavered then broke, leaving the left flank of the Canadians uncovered, particularly that of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion which was obliged to call forward Number 3 Company, at the time in reserve. Then a retreat, not always very cohesive, by the entire unit – and by the Division - became necessary.



**(Right above: *Entitled: Bombardement d'Ypres, le 5 juillet 1915 – from *Illustration**)**

By the 23<sup>rd</sup> the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> when a further retirement became necessary. At times there had been breaches in the defensive lines but, fortunately, either the Germans were unaware of how close they were to a breakthrough, or else they did not have the means to exploit the situation. And then the Canadians closed the gaps.

The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved on April 25 and was withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28<sup>th</sup>, it remained in the area of the front until May 1 when it withdrew into divisional reserve in the area of Vlamertinghe, to the west of Ypres. On May 3 the unit was ordered to the area of the northern French town of Bailleul, there to rest, re-organize and to re-enforce.



**(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – the Brooding Soldier – stands just to the south of the village of Langemark (then Langemarck) at the Vancouver Crossroads where the Canadians withstood the German attack – abetted by gas – at Ypres (today Ieper) in April of 1915. – photograph from 2010*)**

The information to be gleaned from the Battalion War Diary during the period of 2<sup>nd</sup> Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred is apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade Diary – but it was on April 28 that a re-enforcement draft of two-hundred seventy-six other ranks reported *to duty* to the unit, so the count must have been high – it certainly had been elsewhere.

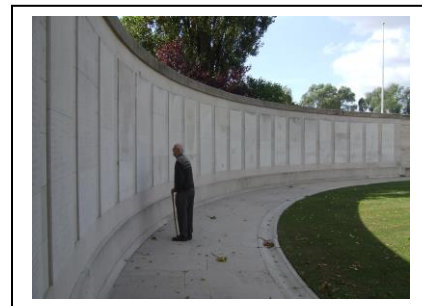
Some ten days later, in mid-May, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to move further down the line to the south, and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further to the south and had asked for British support.

**(continued)**



There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks were to take place in which the British High Command managed to gain three kilometres of ground but also contrived to destroy, by using the unimaginative tactic of the frontal assault, what was left of the British pre-War professional Army. The Canadian Division was also to contribute to the campaign but – not possessing the same numbers of troops – was not to participate to the same extent. It nonetheless suffered.

The role of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to relieve the 16<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion after its attack planned for May 20 on a German-held position, and then was to consolidate and defend that same position. Despite heavy losses the 16<sup>th</sup> had captured its objective, positions which then the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion had occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men had fought and repelled a strong German counter-attack before then being relieved on the following day again.



The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7<sup>th</sup> (*Meerut*) Division\* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, had hardly fared better than the British, each contingent – a Division - incurring over two-thousand casualties before the offensive drew to a close.

The French effort – using the same tactics - was likewise a failure but on an even larger scale; it was to cost them just over one hundred-thousand *killed, wounded and missing*.

*\*The Indian troops also served – and lost heavily – in other battles in this area in 1915 before being transferred to the Middle East.*

(Right above: *A one-time officer who served in the Indian Army during the Second World War, pays his respects to those who fell, at the Indian Memorial at Neuve-Chapelle. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

On May 22 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched away from Festubert to billets in or near to the community of Essars. The reprieve was to last for two weeks, until June 5, when it was ordered further south to Givenchy-les-la-Bassée\*, a small village not far distant south of Festubert. Ordered into the forward trenches on two occasions during that month to support British efforts – and incurring many of its casualties due to repeating the same sort of mistakes as at Festubert – by June 24 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was retiring from the area. At about the same time, over a number of days, so was the entire Canadian Division.

*\*Since the place is oft-times referred to simply as Givenchy it is worthwhile knowing that there are two other Givenchys in the region: Givenchy-le-Noble, to the west of Arras, and Givenchy-en-Gohelle, a village which lies in the shadow of a crest of land which dominates the Douai Plain: Vimy Ridge.*

As a part of that withdrawal from Givenchy, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then Steenwerck in the vicinity of Bailleul. From there it then moved eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

(continued)

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained – as did the entire Canadian Division. In the next months it came to be well-acquainted with the Franco-Belgian area between Armentières in the east – any further east would have been in German-occupied territory – Bailleul in the west, and Messines in the north; given the route marches enumerated in the War Diary and the itineraries used, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise.



(Right above: *Some of the farmland in the area of Messines, a mine crater from the time of the 1917 British offensive in the foreground – photograph from 2014*)

It was to be another eleven months before the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion\* was involved in a further major altercation. Of course, local confrontations – brought about by raids and patrols - were fought from time to time, and artillery duels and the ever-increasing menace of snipers ensured a constant flow of casualties.

In the meantime, on September of 1915 it was the turn of the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the *Kingdom of Belgium*. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent, to the north, of the one held by the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion and the now-designated Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division. The area was several kilometres south of the city of Ypres and it was there, after some seven months of life in and about the trenches, that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was about to fight its first major action of the *Great War*.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was almost the spring of 1916, as has already been noted on a previous page, when Private Pilot had reported from the Canadian Base Depot *to duty* with his new unit, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Having joined the Battalion on March 4, it was to be another six days before he was to undergo his first experience of the trenches when his unit relieved the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the front lines in the area of the *Steenbeck*\* on the night of March 10-11. His first tour was to be a relatively quiet affair.

*\*An area where in 1917 the Newfoundland Regiment was to win two Battle Honours during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres: Passchendaele.*

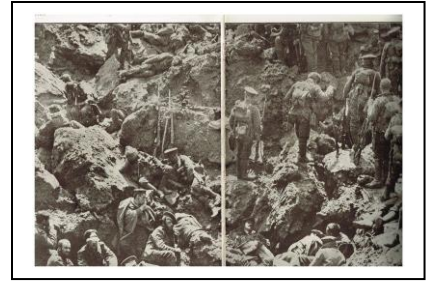
Some two weeks later, on March 27, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division – and thus Private Pilot's Battalion - was to change sectors, moving from the sector south of, to the one north of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, and into the *Ypres Salient* on the southern and south-eastern outskirts of the city of Ypres itself. Just to the east of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division had been stationed the newly-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division, in the sector dominated by a small promontory: *Mount Sorrel*.

During that same period, the last week of March and particularly the first weeks of April, the relative tranquillity still being experienced by Private Pilot and his comrades-in-arms of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the new sector, was not at all to be enjoyed by the troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. They were about to receive their baptism of fire in a major engagement.

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The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had excavated a number of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. This was followed immediately by an infantry assault.



(Above right: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps at St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

After a brief initial success the attack soon bogged down and, by April 4, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had the British, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> of the month, when the battle was called off, both sides were back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Division affair and Private Pilot and the other personnel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery. This would have been particularly true for Private Pilot, of course, during the nine-day period from April 4 to 16 – he was allowed an extra day for travel – when he had been granted leave. Where he may have gone for those days has not been recorded – alas! - among his papers.

Six weeks later it was to be the turn of the battalions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division to receive the attentions of the German Army – although in fairness, one must be reminded that it had been the *British* who had attacked at St-Éloi – before the urgency of the situation made the deployment of other units, mostly of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, necessary.

From June 2 to 14 the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* was fought out between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



(Above right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches 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 Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing an impromptu counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground of June 2.

Badly organized, this operation was to prove a dismal failure: many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(Right below: *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*)

The events of the afternoon and evening of June 2 had interrupted an already busy day for the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports that afternoon.

Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division sector, orders had been given... *for the Battalion to ‘stand to’ and be ready to move at a moment notice... Soon after this the Battalion was ordered to proceed to the support of the Canadian 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion and made a forced march... to Zillebeke Etang...*

At this time Private Pilot was to spend some forty-eight hours – June 5 to 7 - receiving medical attention in the 26<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, possibly a slight case of shell-shock, before being discharged back to his unit

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

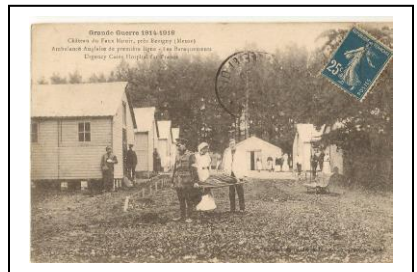
The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion had not been involved in the disastrous counter-offensives made by Canadian troops on June 3 and was, in fact, engaged in only defensive activities. Even so, the casualty count for June 2 and 3 numbered forty-four.

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

On June 4 there was no concerted action on the part of the Canadians; the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion spent much of its time consolidating positions and sending out reconnaissance parties, all the time receiving the attention of the German artillery. Casualties for June 4 came to a total of forty-eight.

The War Diarist’s entry for the 5<sup>th</sup> reports no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion. There were reported, nonetheless, thirty *killed, wounded or missing in action*.

(continued)



On June 6 the War Diarist once again reports little activity in the area of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Nor does he report – but, then, why should he? – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at Hooze Village. The Germans had then managed to gain some territory before their advance was contained. The 13<sup>th</sup> suffered half-a-dozen casualties on that day.

*(Right: Troops – in this instance British – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Salient. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the summer of 1916. – from Illustration)*

Late in the night of the 7<sup>th</sup>, following an uneventful day – by the standards of the time – and with no casualties due to enemy activity, the Battalion was withdrawn to the south-west of Ypres to arrive in its billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>. There the unit remained until June 11 when it began a march which was to bring the Battalion back to the area of *Mount Sorrel* where it would serve in the now-imminent assault.

By midnight of that June 12, some twenty-eight hours after beginning its return march, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was in its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

*(Excerpts from the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 12-13) At 1. 30 a.m. immediately our artillery lifted to the old British trenches, our men, the first and second line under Major K.M. Perry, the third and fourth under Major G.E. McCuaig sprang up on the parapet and set off at a steady pace, over very rough ground and through a heavy barrage and succeeded in gaining the first objective...*

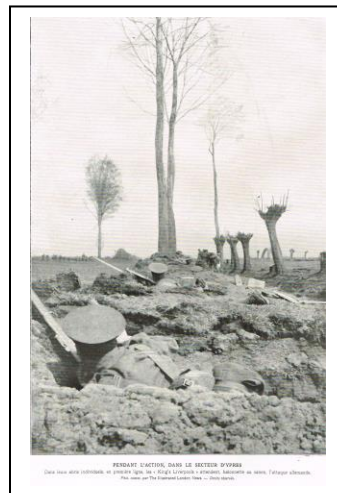
*As soon as the bombardment of the old British lines lifted at 1.50 a.m. the party again advanced at this stage the going was very heavy...*

*The attack proceeded briskly, bombing the enemy down the trenches, and directly the final objective was reached, Major McCuaig sent up a red flare...*

The affair was over by mid-morning, the remainder of the day spent in consolidation, taking care of the wounded of both sides and of prisoners... and in the burial of the dead. The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion retired later that night.

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 until the 13<sup>th</sup> – had thus culminated with this second and highly successful - having been better prepared and also supported by a confident artillery programme - counter-attack by the Canadians on June 13. It was the final offensive of the confrontation, a military *quid pro quo* which left both sides in approximately the same positions that they had been occupying on June 2 when the affair had started.

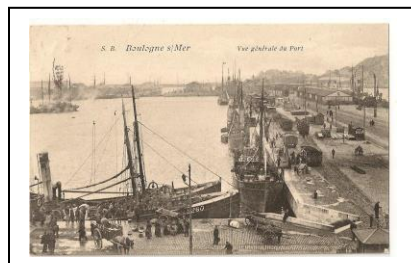
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**(Preceding page: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian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

**On that June 13, the last official day of the *Battle of Mount Sorrel*, Private Pilot was wounded. By the end of that day he had been evacuated from the field and admitted for treatment into the 13<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in the French coastal town of Boulogne. There he was to remain for three days before it was decided that he be returned for further attention to hospital in the United Kingdom.**



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

**(Right below: The image of the steamship *Cambria* in her peace-time livery is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)**

**On June 18 he was embarked onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Cambria* and by the following day again had been taken to the Reading War Hospital. It was to be another month before he was deemed well enough to be transferred to the Heathlands Auxiliary Hospital for further treatment to what had apparently been a minor injury to his left leg, and a more serious one to his left foot. An abridged version of Private Pilot's medical report from that point onwards follows hereafter:**



***Heathlands Auxiliary Hospital – 25/7/1916 - ...foreign body under 4<sup>th</sup> toe and fracture preventing him putting his foot flat...***

***5/8 – unable to walk owing to lump as if a stone were in his boot...no improvement in three weeks...possible operation...***

***15/8 - ...foreign body removed from base of 1<sup>st</sup> phalanx of middle toe...***

***22/8 – Wound healed except between toes where a little dressing is required...***

***23/8 – Admitted to Albion House***

***7/10 – Operation, removal of old scar and nodule of bone from base of 1<sup>st</sup> phalanx...***

***18/11 – Fit for light duty – no pain on walking now...***

**On December 9, 1916, Private Pilot was released from Albion House Auxiliary Hospital and transferred to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at Woodcote Park in the horse-racing town of Epsom, Surrey. His stay there was to be of only nine days' duration as he was discharged on December 18 to be sent forthwith to the Canadian Convalescent (or *Canadian Command*) Depot at St. Leonard's, Hastings, on the English south coast.**

**(continued)**



Readers of Private Pilot's papers will notice that Private Pilot was recorded as having been attached to the C.C.A.C. from July 2 until the time of his transfer to St. Leonard's. The attachment was purely bureaucratic – as to be seen immediately below – and this period was spent by him in hospital as recounted above.

***\*\*The CCAC offices were created to organize the sick and wounded while they received medical attention in the United Kingdom. It apparently made a poor job of it, one source claiming that the CCAC misplaced some twenty-thousand casualties during its short existence. About a year after its formation the CCAC was dissolved.***

He was to spend eight weeks at St. Leonard's while the Canadian Army authorities pondered his future. Then on February 13-14 of 1917 he was *struck off strength* by the C.C.D., to be *taken on strength* by the 20<sup>th</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion (Quebec), just recently organized in the area of the not-so-distant coastal town of Shoreham.

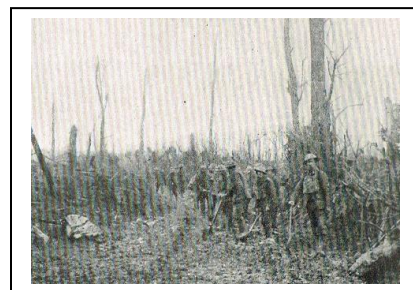
Two months later again, on April 20, he was *struck off strength* by the 20<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion and despatched overseas once more. By the next day Private Pilot had arrived in France, had reported to the Canadian Base Depot, still at Le Havre, and had been *taken on strength* by his former unit, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada).

It was now to be sixteen days before he was despatched from the Base Depot, but his immediate destination on that May 7 was not the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion: it was the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion which, at the time, was stationed in the area of Villers-au-Bois, to the north-west of Arras.

He arrived to join his temporary unit on May 9, the War Diarist of the 1<sup>st</sup> Entrenching Battalion at the time recording that the unit had...*Received reinforcements from CBD as follows: 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, 1 officer. 13<sup>th</sup> Bn, 4 off. 21ors\*. 15<sup>th</sup> Bn. 1 off.*

***\*other ranks***

***\*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 these battalions 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)***

Private Pilot's attachment was for just five days after which time, on May 14, he and his fellow re-enforcements – the draft now swollen to number fifty *other ranks* – left to join – or to re-join – the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion at nearby Gouy-Servins. The records – confirmed by the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary – record this as having taken place on the same day.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the meantime, while Private Pilot had been passing those ten months in hospital and in rehabilitation, his 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been continuing to wage its war.

For the two months which succeeded the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, things reverted to the everyday routines of trench warfare. There was no concerted infantry action by either side, such activity being again limited to raids and patrols. However, this did not preclude a lengthy casualty list at times\*, enemy artillery taking its almost daily toll as it was to do throughout the entire conflict.

*\*For example, during the tour in the front lines of July 15 to 19 inclusive, the War Diarist noted fifty-seven killed, wounded and missing in action.*

During the month of August the Canadian battalions were gradually withdrawn from the *Ypres Salient* and ordered to camps for training in what was termed *open warfare*. It appears that the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was one of the first to retire, leaving the forward area for Brigade Support on August 7, then three days later moving further to the rear area to begin that period of training.



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

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved piecemeal to the railway station in the northern French centre of St-Omer. The unit entrained there at seven o'clock in the morning to be conveyed south to Conteville, a distance of about eighty kilometres, where it arrived some nine hours afterwards, at four o'clock in the afternoon.

From there it was a further eight kilometres – this time on foot – to the awaiting billets.

*(Right: Almost a century after the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion passed through it on the way to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of the Somme, the once-splendid railway station in St-Omer is today in dire need of renovation – photograph from 2015)*



For the following four days the personnel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched to the south-east, ending their trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1, before next moving onto support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(continued)

(Right: *The Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – claimed by some to be the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – detonated at La Boisselle – photograph from 2011(?)*)



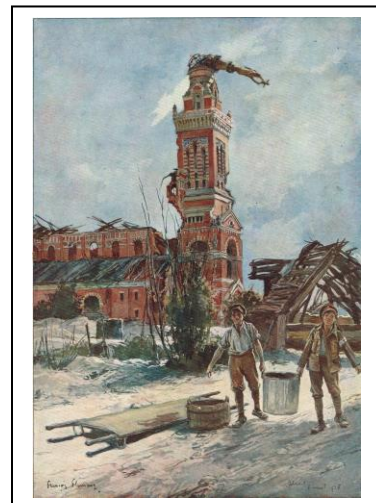
*\*La Boisselle was the site where, on the morning of the attack of July 1 of that same 1916, the British detonated the largest of the nineteen mines that they had excavated and set under the German lines. The crater, now a century old, is still impressive, even today.*

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 costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which nineteen-thousand dead.

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

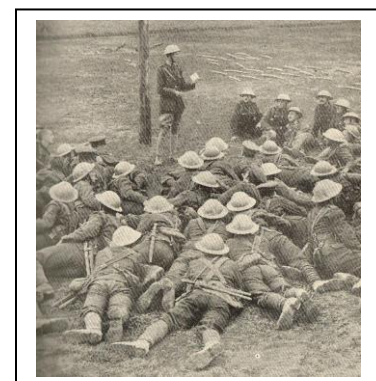
On that first day of *1<sup>st</sup> Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the *1<sup>st</sup> Battalion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

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



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

However, there was to be on September 3, twelve days before that general attack by the Canadians, an assault put in by the *13<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Australian Imperial Force* at a place known as *Mouquet Farm*. Two Companies of the *13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Numbers 1 and 2*, were sent forward to assist in this operation at nine o'clock that morning.



The *13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary* for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially as follows:

(continued)



**At 2.00p.m. No.3 Company... went forward and at 5.00 p.m. the remainder of the Battalion:-**

**Headquarters – Pozieres Wood**

**Nos 1 and 2 Companies advanced and held the positions 73 to No. 1**

**93 to No. 2 and consolidated.**

**No. 1 Company, Bombing the German Communication, and No. 2 Company, repelling a German Attack...**

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

**...During the whole of Sunday Night, the men were heavily shelled, but showed great courage and endurance (sic).**

**Sept 4<sup>th</sup>. ...The heavy shelling continued the whole of the day, on the Front and Support Lines, the Battalion also suffered a heavy Counter Attack. We managed however to connect up 55 and 59 and make a fair trench...**

**1916 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. ...The heavy shelling continued again on both sides, during the whole of the day, our Artillery was very active with guns of all Calibres, and fired over about two shells for every German one...**

**Maybe not a major affair in the eyes of certain authorities, the action at *Mouquet Farm* on September 3 and 4 was to cost the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion a total of three-hundred twenty-three casualties.**

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

**The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained in the forward area until September 7, then moved into the town of Albert until the 9<sup>th</sup> when the unit was ordered on a march in stages to a Rest Area in the proximity of the community of Bonneville.**

**Having stayed at Bonneville for three days, it was then ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)*. It encamped there on the 18<sup>th</sup>, three days after the Canadian general offensive of September 15.**

**It is not recorded how the officers and other ranks of the Battalion felt about this march to nowhere-in-particular and back, but the War Diarist of that time made the following entry: ...A halt was called for a short time at Warloy, and another longer halt was called for at a point not far from Senlis. These rests however were not appreciated much as it was too wet to sit down, the men were wet through and very weary, with standing with their heavy packs\*, although they sang and whistled throughout the march\*\*. ...The only member of the Battalion that seemed to thoroughly enjoy the hill climbing expedition was the Regimental Goat Pet (the Pipers Goat).**

**(continued)**





*\*Perhaps the officers and troops were still wearing the kilts that had been a necessary part of their uniform until the beginning of September when they had been allowed to wear shorts if they wished; it must be remembered that a single kilt is made from fifteen yards of woollen cloth – heavy when dry: extremely heavy when wet.*

*\*\*Apparently they were accompanied on the march not only by the pipers' goat, but by the pipers themselves, the pipe band marching second only to the Headquarters Detachment.*

The 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion took over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, relieving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Battalion near to the village of Courcelette. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit remained there for only two days before retiring into support once more. It was then withdrawn into billets in Albert two days later again, on the 27<sup>th</sup> and further back to Warloy on the morrow.

*(Right below: After the fighting at Courcelette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir)*

Warloy, within hours' marching distance of Albert, was where the Battalion was stationed for a week; during that time it was involved in drills, parades, inspections, a bath for everyone in the unit, church, lectures, musketry and replacing worn equipment and clothing. At the end of those seven days it made that march once more to Albert and then, on the 6<sup>th</sup>, continued on to the camp at *Brickfields*.



The Battalion was now prepared for the upcoming offensive action to be undertaken by the Canadian Corps – in conjunction with the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the objective of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be a German position designated as *Regina Trench*.

Unfortunately it appears that the appropriate page of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary is missing. However, the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade Diary offers some information, albeit less detailed, on the day's happenings:

The attack went in on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>.

The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade War Diary:

*7.45 a.m. 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.*

*9.15 a.m. Message... stating 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. stopped by German wire.*

*9.25 a.m. 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. report situation unchanged.*

*12.19 p.m. Message... ordering 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. to hold on to original position (jumping off line) and to try connect up in the evening with the left of the 16<sup>th</sup> Bn.*

(continued)

**5.30 p.m. Message from 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. timed 2.25 pm. gives position of 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. Those who got into REGINA Trench were bombed towards the 16<sup>th</sup> Bn. Remainder were held up by barbed wire and were practically wiped out by M.G. fire.**

**6.00 p.m. 15<sup>th</sup> Bn. report at 3.45 p.m. that 13<sup>th</sup> Bn. called on 3 platoons of the reinforcing company of 15<sup>th</sup> Bn. and these are being replaced at dusk.**

**13<sup>th</sup> Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.**

**On October 9 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion held on in their former jumping off positions despite... heavy shelling for the greater part of the day... On the night of October 9-10 the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade retired... and the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.**

**(Right: Regina Trench Cemetery and some of the area surrounding it which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops on the night of November 10-11, 1916 – photograph from 2014)**



**The Battalion War Diarist entered the figure of some three-hundred casualties\* for the day of October 8 alone.**

**\*On the entries of days following he also notes imprecise numbers of those originally reported as 'missing' who, by then, were reporting back to duty with the unit.**

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



**On October 11 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) began their march away from the First Battle of the Somme. Passing to the west – always on foot - by a circuitous route behind the city of Arras and then beyond, the unit arrived in a sector further north up the line, on this occasion in the general area of the city and mining centre of Lens.**



**More precisely, the personnel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion now found themselves relieving the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment in trenches at Cabaret and Souchez. The date was October 27.**

**(Right above: The village of Souchez already looked like this in 1915 when the French passed control of the area over to the British. – from Le Miroir)**



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

The following months were spent by the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the same and also adjacent sectors. The officers and men once more settled into an existence in – and out of – the trenches.

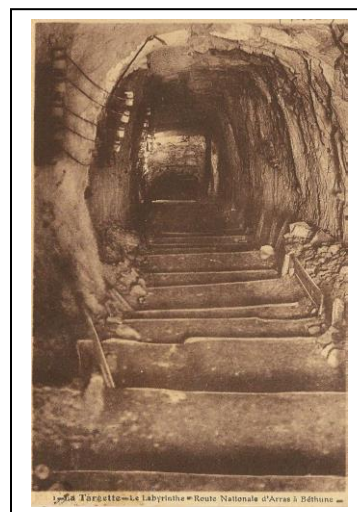
On March 4 the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion began a two-day march from Ruitz – behind the lines – and, during the night of March 6-7, relieved the Canadian 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion in support positions near Maison Blanche, in the vicinity of the village of Neuville St-Vaast. Some six days later, on March 12, it was time for another battalion to take the place of the 13<sup>th</sup> in *support* and for the 13<sup>th</sup> to take over trenches in the front line.

However, during those days spent at Maison Blanche, the personnel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion had not been idle. It must have been apparent to all that there was something big afoot if the tasks allotted to the multitude of working-parties and the carrying-parties – as noted in the War Diary - is evidence to go by:

*(Right: Just one of the network of tunnels, this one in the area of Neuville St-Vaast–La Targette, which became known as the Labyrinth – from a vintage post-card)*

*March 9<sup>th</sup> ... Throughout the day there was a considerable amount of work to be done one way or another. Trench stores etc., had to be checked up, as also had the gas appliances and ammunition...*

*A considerable amount of work had to be done in the way of cleaning up, and reconstructing the weak parts in the dugouts... The Battalion work parties... consisted of the following... working on Vase Tunnel... (another) pushing trucks for Tunnelling Company... cleaning Burn (a small stream)... burying cable from support to Front Line... The list is not exhaustive.*



The period in the front lines added other duties similar to those listed above: carrying-parties, wiring-parties, burial-parties and observation of the fall of friendly artillery fire also became part of the routine. Six days later again, on the 18<sup>th</sup>, the unit retired once more into reserve in the area of Bois-les-Alleux and Mont St-Éloi, avoiding the main roads on the way.



The Battalion was to remain in this area until April 8 when it began to move forward in anticipation of the forthcoming attack.

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



(continued)



Through the use of a system of previously disused French trenches in the area, the Battalion was able to be assembled and to be ready five hours prior to Zero Hour and, in doing so, had incurred only two slight casualties.

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

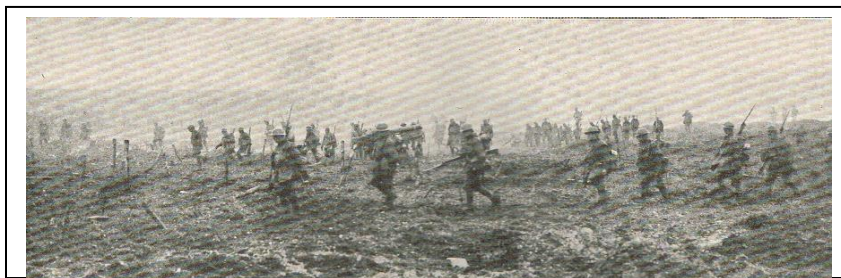


While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, the French *Chemin des Dames* offensive was a disaster.

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

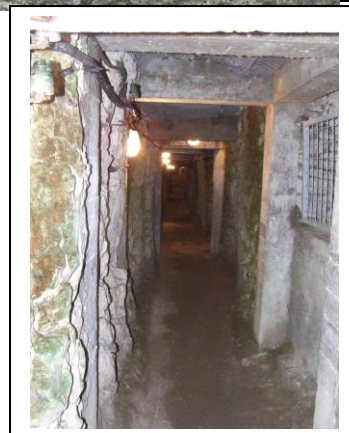
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even a British brigade serving under Canadian command - stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

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



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

The Battalion War Diarist described the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion's role on April 9 thus: *During the Operations of April 9<sup>th</sup> the Battalion was in Brigade Support, so we were unable to report on many of the incidents which occurred ahead of the Battalion. We maintained communication between the attacking Battalions and Brigade during the whole of the operations, and were more or less a Report Centre. This was owing to the forward Battalions being unable to keep their wires intact.*



On April 10 the Canadians finished clearing the area of Vimy Ridge of the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks – which in fact never really materialized.



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

(Right: *The memorial to the fallen of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division at Vimy Ridge stands in a field on the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Thélus. It was set there during Christmas of 1917. – photograph from 2017*)



The remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days and by the end of those five weeks little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

On the night of May 4-5, the entire Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade retired from the front to the area of Mont St-Éloi, then on May 6 a further six-and-a-half kilometres to Chateau de la Haie, before a final march to Gouy-Servins - mercifully less than two kilometres distant - where the unit was to remain until the end of the month.

(Right above: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir*)



As reported on an earlier page, it was during that period spent at Gouy-Servins, on May 14, that a re-enforcement draft, Private Pilot among its number, reported *to duty* with the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion.



\* \* \* \* \*

(Right above: *Canadian during the summer of 1917, the photograph showing the conditions under which the Canadians were obliged to work and fight – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

The following months of June and July were to be spent largely in the routine of front, support and reserve; on that June 29 the Battalion was serving a tour in trenches in the area of Méricourt and Acheville. Patrols had been sent out the night of the 28-29, one of which returned apparently having...*suffered heavily*: reported was a casualty list of nine *wounded*, one *missing* and one *sick*.

*48585, Private John Pilot, 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion – Circumstances of Casualty 29-6-17 – Killed in Action – While on duty in the trenches at Acheville, he was instantly killed by enemy shell fire.*

(continued)

The curious thing is that his death is not mentioned in the otherwise meticulously-documented 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary for that date, or for any other day of the months of May, June or July of 1917.

The son of Edward Frederick Watson\* Pilot (former First Clerk of the Colonial Office, deceased January, 1903) and of Barbara Pilot (née *Merchant*, later *Cullen*\*\* , see above), he was also brother to Agnes, William, Edward and to Robert\*\*\*.

Another family member, or perhaps one of his brothers returned to England, was the Mr. F. Pilot of 1, Sandown Terrace, Wavertree, Liverpool, to whom as of February 1 of 1917, Private Pilot had allocated a monthly twenty dollars from his pay.

*\*The name Frederick comes from his Edward Pilot's father's will; that of Watson is from his headstone.*

*\*\*Amongst Maurice Galbraith Cullen's other accomplishments was that of being appointed official War Artist to the Canadian Government in 1918.*

*\*\*\*Robert Wakeham Pilot was also to become a well-known artist.*

Private Pilot was reported as having been *killed in action* of June 29, 1917, at the front near Acheville.

John Cecil Pilot had enlisted at the *apparent age* of eighteen years and eleven-and-a-half months: however, the recorded date of his birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, of November 2, 1896, would suggest that he had enlisted just *before* the age of eighteen years.

Private John Cecil Pilot was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal)\*.

*\*It would appear that his service at the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Veterinary Hospital at Le Havre did not entitle him to the 1914-1915 Star.*



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 25, 2023.