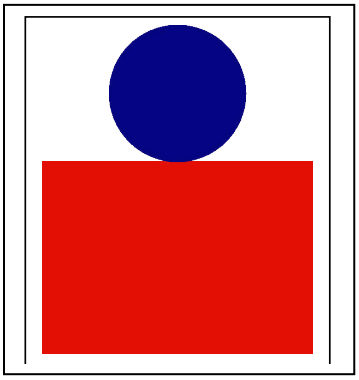
Private Alexander Pitcher (Number 192777) of the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Barlin Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference II.D.17.

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



(continued)

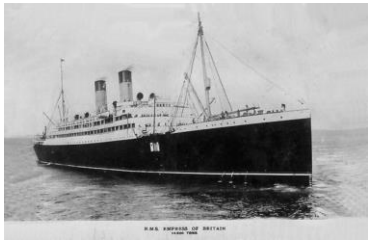
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *shipper*, Alexander Pitcher appears to have left behind him no obvious history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. All that one can say with any certainty is that he was in the city of Toronto during some time of the month of August, 1915, as that is where and when he enlisted.

His first pay records document that the Canadian Army began to remunerate him for his serves on that August 1; they also suggest that it was also on that date that he was taken on strength by the 92nd (*Overseas*) Battalion (*48th Highlanders*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Alexander Pitcher had already by this time, according to his attestation papers, served six months in Toronto as a soldier of the 48th Highlanders, a Canadian Militia regiment*.

The Canadian Militia could not, by law, serve outside the frontiers of the country. However, it was able to recruit on behalf of the new Overseas Battalions which began to be authorized once war had been declared. Thus it was that Alexander Pitcher found himself a private soldier in the 92nd Battalion.

He presented himself for attestation at *the Armouries* in Toronto on August 13 before, seventeen days later, undergoing a medical examination. It was on that same August 30 that the officer commanding the 92nd Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel G.T. Chisholm, brought to a conclusion the formalities of enlistment when he declared – on paper – that…*Alexander Pitcher,,,having been finally approved and inspected by me this day…I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

From August to October of that year, 1915, the Battalion was in training at *Camp Niagara* at Niagara-on-the-Lake before a first draft of the unit was sent overseas. These troops were eventually employed to re-enforce units already serving at the front on the Continent, a fate which was to befall the parent unit – and the majority of the two-hundred fifty battalions raised in Canada to fight the war – not long after its arrival in the United Kingdom.



It was to be May 9 of the following spring before the officers and *other ranks* entrained in Toronto for the journey to Halifax. The 92nd Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Empress of Britain* – a requisitioned vessel of the *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company* – on May 20 for passage overseas.

(Right above: *The photograph of RMS Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*.)

Private Pitcher's unit was not to travel alone: also on board the vessel en route to the United Kingdom were the 78th and 82nd Battalions of Canadian Infantry and a draft of the 12th Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery. The *Empress* eventually sailed two days later, on May 22, in the company of the ocean liners *Adriatic* and *Baltic*, with an escort provided by the British cruiser HMS *Drake*.

(continued)

The small convoy docked a week after sailing in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on May 29. It was thereupon transported to East(?) Sandling, a subsidiary camp of the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, already established by that time on the Dover Straits in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone.

(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 1916)

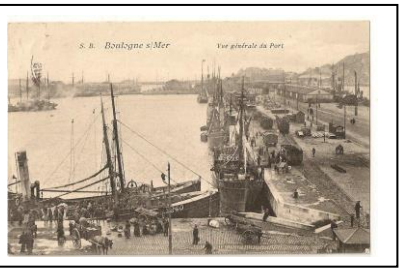
During this period of his travels Private Pitcher decided to allocate a portion of his pay to Miss Clara Bosman of 68, McKenzie Crescent, Toronto. Thus as of June 1, 1916, the sum of twenty dollars was to be drawn from his pay each month for that purpose.

There appear to be no records available of any training schedule undergone by the Battalion at this time. Private Pitcher was appointed to the rank of lance-corporal *with pay* – for NCOs on probation, the position was not always remunerated – on August 1 of that 1916, to revert to that of private soldier only four weeks afterwards on August 27. There is no documented reason for this although one might surmise that it was to allow him to depart on *active service* to the Continent on the following day.

And by that time Lance Corporal Pitcher had also drawn up a will, on August 16, in which he divided his all between his sister Elizabeth Ann and his friend, Miss Bosman.

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

It was on the day that he reverted to the ranks, August 27, that the again-Private Pitcher was transferred* on paper to the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) before being transferred by ship later that same day to the Continent. Likely having travelled through nearby Folkestone to Boulogne on the French coast opposite, he was reported as arrived at the Canadian Base Depot established in close proximity to the industrial port-city of Le Havre.



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

This would have involved at some time an important change of uniform: the 48th Highlanders Regiment – from which had been drawn the 92nd Battalion – apparently wore a kilt of the Davidson tartan whereas the 13th Battalion sported a version of that of the Black Watch.

(Preceding page: *The image of the Davidson tartan is from the Collins Gem series of books*.)

Private Pitcher then apparently lingered at Le Havre for almost three weeks before he was despatched to his new unit on September 16. The 13th Battalion War Diary then confirms that a re-enforcement draft reported *to duty* with the unit on September 20. On that date the unit was resting at the *Brickfields Camp* having recently been involved in some heavy fighting (see below).

(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)

*** * * * ***

The 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) was an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 1st Canadian Division*. In mid-October of 1914 the Division had been the first force to arrive in the United Kingdom from Canada 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 2nd 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 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 from a Canadian-Scottish unit*. – from a vintage post-card)

For the first weeks of its service on the Continent, the Canadian Division was to be posted to the *Fleurbaix Sector* in northern France and just south of the border town of Armentières. There, for the first two months of the Canadian presence on the *Western Front*, the situation was relatively quiet and the personnel of the 13th Battalion began to fit into the rigours and the routines 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: *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*)

In mid-April the Division, moving north into the Kingdom of Belgium, eventually took up positions in the *Ypres Salient*, an area which would prove to be one of the most lethal theatres of the Great War. And whereas the first weeks of the Canadian presence on the Continent had been relatively quiet, the dam was about to burst - although it was to be gas rather than water which, for a few days, threatened to sweep all before it.

The date was April 22, 1915.

(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd 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 *2nd 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.

(Right: *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 first 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 13th 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 became necessary.

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

By the 23rd the situation had become relatively stable – at least temporarily - and the positions in the vicinity of Sint-Juliaan held until the morning of the 24th when a further retirement became necessary. At times there had been breeches 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 13th Battalion was relieved on April 25 and was withdrawn to some former French reserve trenches. Called forward again on the 28th, 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 move into northern France, to the area of Bailleul, there to re-enforce and to re-organize.

(Right above: *The Memorial to the 1st 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 2nd Ypres is at times understandably sparse. The number of casualties incurred is apparently not noted – neither does it seem to appear in the 5th 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.

In mid-May the 13th Battalion moved down the line to the south, over the Franco-Belgian frontier, and into the areas of Festubert and Givenchy. The French were about to undertake a major offensive just further south again and had asked for British support.

There at Festubert a series of attacks and counter-attacks took place in which the British High Command managed to gain some 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 13th Battalion was to relieve the 16th 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 16th captured its objective, positions which then the 13th Battalion occupied. On the following day, May 21, the men fought and repelled a strong German counter-attack before then being relieved on the following day again.

The Canadian Division and Indian troops, the 7th (*Meerut*) Division* also having been ordered to serve at Festubert, were to fare hardly 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 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.

(Preceding page: *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 13th 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 13th 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 13th Battalion was to march to billets in Essars, in La Becque and then Steenwerck, all in the vicinity of Bailleul. From there it was to move eastwards and into Belgium, to the *Ploegsteert Sector*, just across the frontier.

Having reached the area of Ploegsteert on July 5, there the 13th 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 13th Battalion* was involved in any 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.

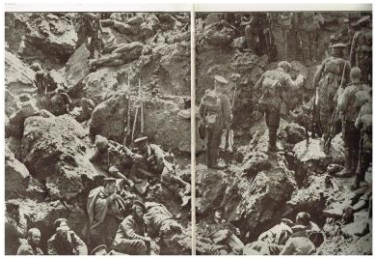
In September of 1915 it was the turn of the Canadian 2nd Division to land on the Continent and to also be posted to the *Kingdom of Belgium*. It was to be stationed in the sector adjacent and to the north of the one held by the 13th Battalion and the other units of the now-designated 1st Canadian Division.

(continued)

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 2nd Division was about to fight its first major action of the *Great War*.

For the 2nd Division, the first weeks of April were not to be as tranquil as those being experienced during the same period by the battalions of the 1st Division.

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 Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th 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 2nd Division affair and the personnel of the 13th Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery.

In March and April of 1916 the Canadian 1st Division had been transferred from the *Ploegsteert Sector* to the area of *the Salient* comprising the southern outskirts of Ypres. It was still adjacent to the Canadian 2nd Division, but now to its left-hand and northern flank. And the 3rd Canadian Division – having officially come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916 – had recently taken over responsibility for a south-eastern sector of *the Ypres Salient*.

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)

(continued)

(Right below: *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)

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was 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 that June 2 had interrupted a busy day for the 13th Battalion: route marches, bayonet exercises, gas-helmet drill and Company training had been followed by Battalion sports in the afternoon.

Then, at seven-thirty on that evening, after reports of a German break-through in the Canadian 3rd 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 14th Battalion and made a forced march… to Zillebeke Etang…*

The 13th 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 by the Canadians; the 13th 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 5th reports no infantry action undertaken by the Battalion. There were reported, nonetheless, thirty *killed*, *wounded* or *missing in action.*

On June 6 the War Diarist once again reports little activity in the area of the 13th Battalion. Nor does he report – but, then, why should he? – the detonation, by the Germans, of mines under the Canadian positions at Hooge village.

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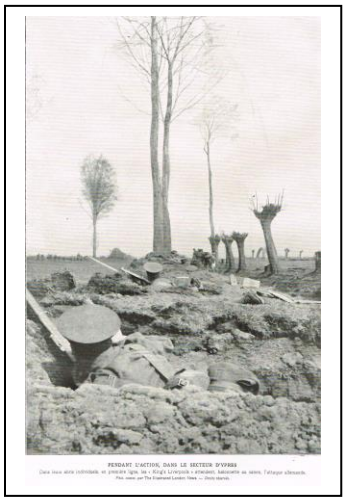
The Germans had then managed to gain some territory before their advance was contained. The 13th suffered half-a-dozen casualties on that day.



(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 7th, 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 their billets at four o'clock in the morning of the 8th. 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 13th Battalion was in its allotted positions in the front and support trenches.

(Excerpts from the 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 13th Battalion retired later that night.

The engagements of the previous eleven days – from June 2 until the 13th – had thus culminated with this second and more 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.

(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 – and then of 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)

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*.

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 13th 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.

Three weeks later again, on the night of August 27-28, the 13th 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 13th Battalion passed through it on the way to the 1st 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 Battalion marched to the south-east, ending their trek at billets in the vicinity of the provincial town of Albert on September 1. They were to move into support positions at La Boisselle on the very next day.

(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.

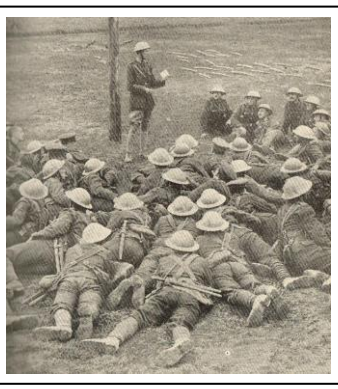
By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space of only four hours - of which nineteen-thousand dead.

(continued)

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

On that first day of *1st 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 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 Courcelette.



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

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

The 13th Battalion War Diary for September 3, 4 and 5 reads partially thus: *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: *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 4th. …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 5th 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 13th 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 13th Battalion remained in the forward area until September 7, then in the town of Albert until the 9th when the unit was ordered on a route-march in stages to a Rest Area in the proximity of the community of Bonneville.

There at Bonneville for three days, it was then ordered back to Albert or, more precisely, to the large camp at nearby *Brickfields* (*La Briqueterie*). The unit encamped there on the 18th, three days after the Canadian general offensive of September 15.

It is not recorded how the officers and other ranks 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).***

****Perhaps the officers and troops were wearing the kilts that they had worn 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.***

It was, of course, just after the Battalion had returned to *Brickfield Camp*, that Private Pitcher and his re-enforcement draft reported *to duty*. Three days later, he and they were to endure their first experience of *the Somme*.

*** * * * ***

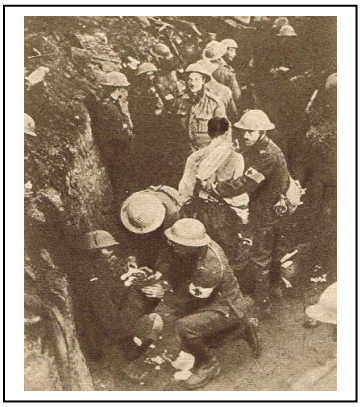
The 13th Battalion took over positions in the front line on the night of September 23-24, relieving the 2nd Canadian Battalion near to the village of Courcelette. Shelled heavily but seemingly ineffectively, the unit remained there for only two days before retiring into support once more. It was then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

(Right below: *After the fighting of 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 6th, 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 3rd Corps. The assault was to take place on October 8, on which day the objective of the 13th Battalion was to be a German position designated as *Regina Trench.*



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

The attack on the German positions went in on schedule after the accompanying barrage had been unleashed at ten minutes to five on the morning of the 8th.

(Right: *Canadian Army Medical Corps personnel at work in a Regimental First Aid Post in the forward area* – from *Le Miroir*)

The following are excerpts from the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade War Diary:

7.45 a.m. 13th Bn. states casualties exceedingly heavy.

9.15 a.m. Message… stating 13th Bn. stopped by German wire.

9.25 a.m. 13th Bn. report situation unchanged.

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

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

(continued)

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

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

13th Bn. report barrage has slackened and otherwise situation unchanged.

On October 9 the 13th 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 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade retired… and the 13th Battalion or what was left of it returned to the town of ALBERT to the billets previously occupied before going into the trenches.

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 to duty with the unit.**

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

On October 11 the 13th Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) began their march away from the *First Battle of the Somme*. Passing to the west then north – 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 mining centre of Lens.

More precisely, Private Pitcher and colleagues found themselves relieving the 13th 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*)

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

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

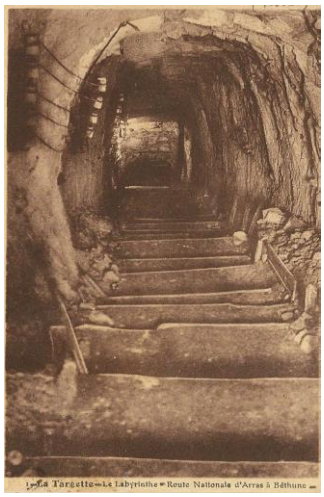
(continued)

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

(Right above: *A carrying-party loading up – one of the duties of troops when not serving in the front lines: The head-strap was an idea adapted from the aboriginal peoples of North America.* – from *Le Miroir*)

During those days spent at *Maison Blanche*, the personnel of the 13th Battalion had apparently not been idle. It must have been apparent to all that there was something big afoot if the tasks allotted to – or witnessed by – Private Pitcher and also by his peers – and as noted in the War Diary - is evidence to go by:

***March 9th …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.**



(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)

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 18th, 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 by-then 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.

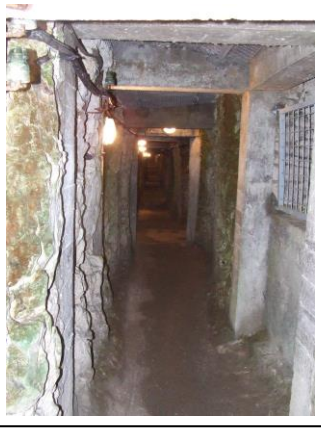
On April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive 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 proved an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be a further 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 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: *Grange Tunnel - one of the few remaining galleries still open to the public at Vimy Ridge one hundred years later* – photograph from 2008(?))

The Battalion War Diarist described the 13th Battalion's role on April 9 thus: *During the Operations of April 9th 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 case of the anticipated German counter-attacks – which in fact never really amounted to much.

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 breech and the conflict once more reverted to one of inertia.

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

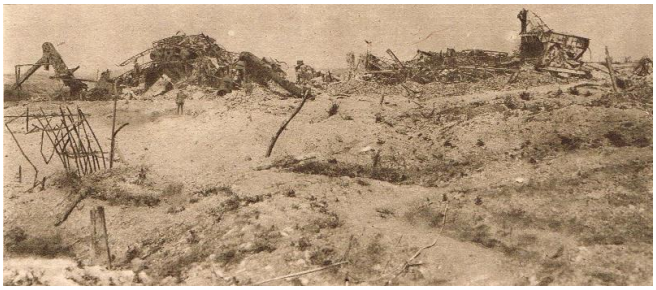
On the night of May 4-5, the entire Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade retired from the front to the area of Mont St-Éloi, then on May 6 a further six-and-a-half kilometres to Chateau de la Haie, before a final march to Gouy-Servins, mercifully less than two kilometres distant, where the unit was to remain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

The months of June and July were spent much in the routine of front, support and reserve. Towards the latter part of July the Battalion was withdrawn to the area of Noeux-les-Mines and then Aix-Noulette for extra training - the 13th Battalion was to play a major role in the upcoming attack on *Hill 70*, in the northern outskirts of Lens.

(Right above: *Canadian soldiers and an officer 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 British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from *that* area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



(Right above: *A further example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917* – from *Le Miroir*)

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

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

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

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

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute*. – photograph from 1914)

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

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

(Right: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, hidden from aerial observation under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action* – from *Le Miroir*)

(Right below: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle* – from *Le Miroir*)

The taking of *Hill 70* had, however, according to his personal dossier, been accomplished without the services of Private Pitcher: from August 8 until 19 he had been granted ten day's leave – plus a further day for travel – to Paris.

Apparently this Canadian offensive campaign had been planned so as to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing British summer offensive in Belgium was proceeding less well than expected and the High Command was looking for reinforcements to make good the exorbitant losses. The Australians and then the Canadians were ordered to prepare to move north, thus the Canadians were obliged to abandon their plans.

There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired actions in the Lens-Béthune sectors and the troops yet again were to settle back into that monotonous but at times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area. On most days, according to the Battalion War Diary, it was the artillery which fought it out – but, of course, the infantry was usually the target.

(continued)

During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches was still to be the rule. However there were several occasions on which the unit was retired to areas behind the lines, particularly for training, yet the War Diary also shows that sports were being considered more and more to be a morale booster among the troops.

During the evening of September 7 the Battalion was relieved from the front line and moved – under fire but no casualties were reported - into billets in the vicinity of Bouvigny-Boyeffles, behind the forward area and directly to the west of Lens.

But Private Pitcher was no longer serving with the 13th Battalion: he had been wounded on September 5 or 6 while serving in the front line trenches in the area of the Cité St-Pierre, a mining suburb of Lens. From there he had been evacuated to the 6th Casualty Clearing Station at Bruay by the evening of August 6, for treatment to multiple bullet injuries* to both of his legs.

(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)

The following casualty report cites *shell splinters*: the medical personnel of the 6th CCS recorded the wounds as having been inflicted by *bullets*.

Casualty report: *Died of Wounds – He was wounded by shell splinters in both legs at Cité St. Pierre, North West of Lens, and died shortly after being taken* to No. 6 Casualty Clearing Station.*

His death occurred two days later, on the same day that the medical staff deemed him to be 'dangerously wounded'.

The son of Alexander Pitcher, former teacher*, deceased August 13, 1899, and of Margaret Jane Pitcher (née *Purchase*), originally from Lamaline but latterly of 25, William Street, St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to at least Harold-Edward, to Elizabeth-Ann, to Hubert, Kenneth-Stanley, and to Isabella (died aged seven years) – and perhaps to Alice-Susanna, Mabel and Thomas.

Was he the Alexander Pitcher recorded as, in the year 1865, being the first teacher in the south-coast community of Ramea?

Private Pitcher was reported as having *died of wounds* on September 8 (at first on September 9, then amended) by the officer commanding the 6th Casualty Clearing Station.

Alexander Pitcher had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-one years and two months: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, June 11, 1894.

(continued)

(Preceding page: *A family memorial which stands in the Old Anglican Cemetery on Forest Road, St. John's, commemorates the life and sacrifice of Private Pitcher (cited on the stone as Lance Corporal Pitcher)* – photograph from 2015)

Private Alexander Pitcher was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

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