



Corporal Robert Pitman (elsewhere often found as *Pittman*) (Number 177911) of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Caix British Cemetery: Grave reference II.I.16..

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

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *miner*, Robert Pitman may have been the young man found on the passenger list of the SS *Bruce* on two occasions in the year 1908. The sixteen year-old youth of the May 9 crossing from Port aux Basques to North Sidney was on his way to Glace Bay while the teen-ager - of similar age - of the August 28 voyage from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia simply provided Cape Breton as his destination (also see further below).

However, if indeed this particular Robert Pittman were the subject of this short biography, by the year 1915 he had found his way to Montreal in the province of Québec, for this was when and where he was to enlist\*.

*\*He had also apparently found his way even further to the west as he cited the community of Haileybury, Ontario, as his address at the time of his enlistment.*

That enlistment took place in Montréal on November 29, 1915, as his attestation papers, his first pay records and a first medical report all confirm, the medical examination having found him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*, before he then attested before a local Justice of the Peace on that same date.

The *official* conclusion to the formalities of Private Pitman's enlistment came to pass some three weeks later, on December 23, when an officer - with an unidentifiable name - acting on behalf of the Officer Commanding the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Irving Putman Rexford, declared – on paper – that...*Robert Pitmann (sic)...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*. Private Pitman was then *taken on strength* by Lieutenant Colonel Rexford's 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the unit with which he was later to end his career\*.

*\*On his attestation papers of November 29 Robert Pitman declared that he had previously spent a month serving with the 97<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the CEF. Nowhere else in his papers is this confirmed thus it may be that upon his enlistment on November 29 that he had been attached to the 97<sup>th</sup> Regiment (Algonquin Rifles) of the Canadian Militia until such time that he could be transferred to an Overseas Battalion.*

*The Canadian Militia had been formed with its principal purpose being the defence of Canada and it had no legal mandate to operate outside the borders of the country. However, these units were permitted to recruit for the Overseas Battalions newly authorized after the Declaration of War in August of 1914; they actively did so and, in fact, the majority of the first volunteers for the Overseas Battalions were to be men of the Canadian Militia regiments.*

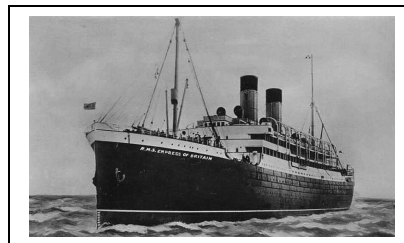
Private Pitman likely trained with his 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion at the newly-opened – in April of 1914 – Canadian Grenadier Guards Armoury on Esplanade Avenue, Montreal. The unit had been recruiting only since September of 1915 but was apparently prepared, both in numbers and the quality of its instruction, to be despatched to overseas service in April of 1916.

However, it appears from his records, that Private Pitman had spent a month of that interim period in hospital. Suffering from a case of the mumps, he is documented as having been a patient of the Military Hospital, Saint-Jean, from January 9 until January 25 of 1916.

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Canadian Grenadier Guards*) boarded ship in the harbour at Halifax on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of April of the spring of 1916. It was the *Canadian Pacific Steamship Company* vessel *Empress of Britain* on which Private Pitman's Battalion was to take passage to the United Kingdom in the company of the 72<sup>nd</sup> and 76<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as the Number 3 Party of the 224<sup>th</sup> Battalion and a re-enforcement draft of the 13<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery.

(Right below: *The image of the Empress of Britain is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

The *Empress* sailed on April 25 to dock nine days later, on May 4, in the English west-coast port of Liverpool. From there the unit was transported southwards by train to the Canadian military camp established in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – to which place *Camp Bramshott* owed its name – in the county of Hampshire.



(Right below: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)

Before they left on *active service*, that is to say to a theatre of war, Canadian soldiers were encouraged to allocate a monthly sum from their pay to a recipient of their choice. It was often a parent and such was the case of Private Pitman who had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars, as of May 1, 1916, to his father, Thomas. He then also penned a will some seven weeks later, on June 20, while still at the Canadian camp at Bramshott, a paper on which he bequeathed his everything to, again, his father.



On July 8, Private Pitman was attached to the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Bombing Company\* but what exactly this entailed is not clear. As seen below, he apparently crossed the Channel to France with his 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion to serve at *the Somme*. Then later, on November 4 he ceased to be attached to the Bombing Company. The Battalion War Diary makes no mention at all of this transfer or that of any other personnel.

*\*Formed to specialize in the use of Mills Bombs (hand grenades).*

In the middle of August the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered overseas. In fact, at the time, a great number of Canadian units were to cross the English Channel to France. The newly-organized Canadian 4<sup>th</sup> Division was leaving the United Kingdom on *active service*.

Private Pitman's 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion began the journey leaving *Camp Bramshott* on the morning of August 11, 1916. It embarked in the English south-coast port of Southampton onto His Majesty's Transport *Archangel* later that evening and documents confirm that it landed in the French port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine at a quarter past seven on the next morning, August 12.



(Preceding page: *The photograph of HMT Archangel is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion then marched to a nearby rest camp, thus remaining in the area of Le Havre for a further three days\*.

*\*By this time a large Canadian Base Depot had been established at Rouelles in the vicinity of Le Havre and, until mid-spring of 1917, re-enforcements were to pass through there before being despatched to report to their new units 'in the field'. However, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary makes no mention of it, likely because the arriving units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division were already organized autonomous forces.*

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

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



*\*There was also a Canadian 5<sup>th</sup> Division but, once having been formed, it remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of the Great War, for training and re-enforcement purposes.*

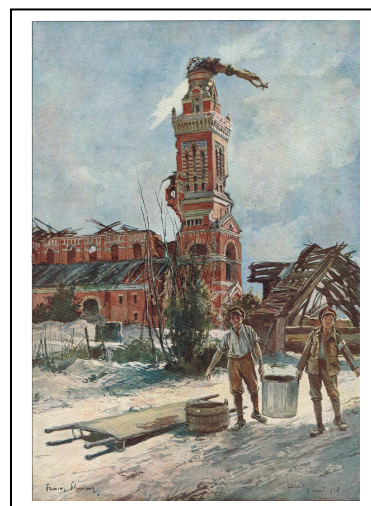
As reported above, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion arrived in France on August 12 of 1916, landing in the French port-city of Le Havre. Three days later it and the entire Division was on its way north, to the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and then beyond, to serve for six weeks in a sector to the south-west of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres (today *Ieper*).



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

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

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



(continued)

(Preceding page: *Canadian soldiers working in Albert carrying water, the town's already-damaged basilica to be seen in the background – from Illustration*)

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

On the first day of *First Somme* all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1, 1916, at a place called Beaumont-Hamel.

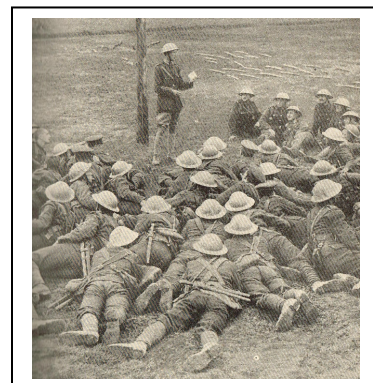


(Right: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)

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

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

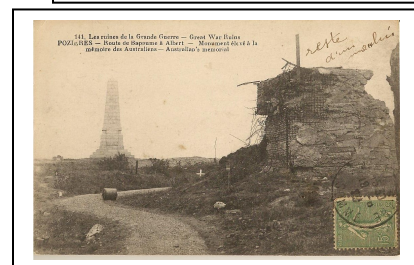
(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette (see below), September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



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

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

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



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

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

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

On November 3 Private Pitman had been sent to report to the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance established at the *Tara Hill Camp* where it had very recently taken over responsibility for the Tent Hospital there. It may well be that minor surgery was undertaken there to correct his complaint: haemorrhoids.

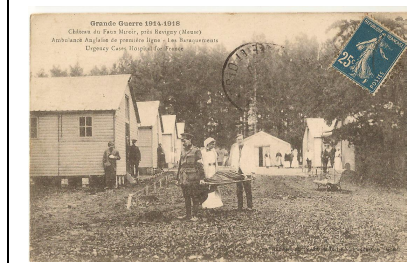
(Right: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some – from a vintage post-card*)

He was released from the 12<sup>th</sup> CFA on November 12 or 13 – both dates are cited – and he is recorded as having then returned *to duty* at a time when his Battalion was in the rear area but also by then preparing for that previously-mentioned attack in the area of *Regina Trench*. There is no information in his file to suggest other than that Private Pitman was to play his part in the operation.

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

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

Relieved on November 19, the day following the attack, three days later again, on November 22 the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to march away from *the Somme*. By December 4 the unit had marched in a semi-circle – to the west and then to the north - to Frévilleurs, some twenty-five kilometres north-west of the city of Arras.



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

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



***\*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 the forward area, the latter furthest away.***

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

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



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

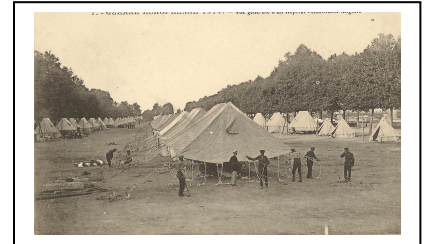
Casualties were to be few during this entire period and, as ever, it was the enemy artillery to which those that occurred were mainly due – some two-thirds of all *Great War* casualties were the result of shell-fire. It was to be sickness and, perhaps surprisingly, dental work which were to keep the medical facilities busy during the winter of 1916-1917.

Private Pitman was to be one of the sick. On December 15, his Battalion having retired from *the Somme* by that time, he was admitted into the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance at Beugin on December 15 for treatment for bronchitis.

On the morrow he was transferred to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Casualty Clearing Station at nearby Bruay where he would now remain until the final day of 1916\* when he was discharged back to duty.

*\*It must be remembered that in the days before the advent of anti-biotics, infection – whatever the cause – was potentially lethal and often required a lengthy period of care in order to combat it.*

*(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and whenever the necessity were to arise – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were often of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)*



On January 23 of the New Year, 1917, Private Pitman was promoted for a first time, on this occasion to the rank of lance corporal with pay\*. Just over two months later, on April 1, there was a subsequent appointment, and a second stripe, as he was elevated to the rank of corporal.

*\*A raise in pay was not always the case upon promotion, particularly if the newly-acquired rank was classified as ‘acting’.*

On March 26 the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved from its then-current tour in the front-line positions and withdrawn to a rest area at Chateau de la Haie. From the next day until April 2 the unit was to undergo extensive training for the upcoming British offensive, so whether there was much rest to be enjoyed is speculative – but then, no-one was being shot at.

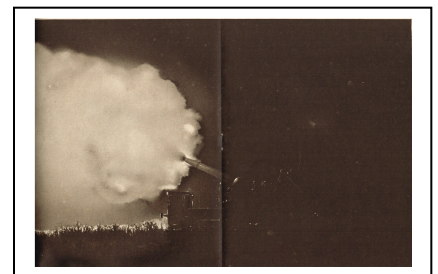
On April 3, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved to the front area.

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

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

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

As those days passed, the artillery barrage grew progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of another battalion described it as...*drums*. By this time, of course, the Germans were aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn threw retaliatory fire onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft were very busy.



*(Right above: A heavy British artillery piece\* continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration)*

*\*It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that a British Division – only a single Brigade employed on April 9 – also participated.*



***Almost fifty per cent of the personnel who had been employed for that day were British, not to mention those whose contribution – such as those who dug the tunnels - allowed for it to happen.***

**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 count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.**



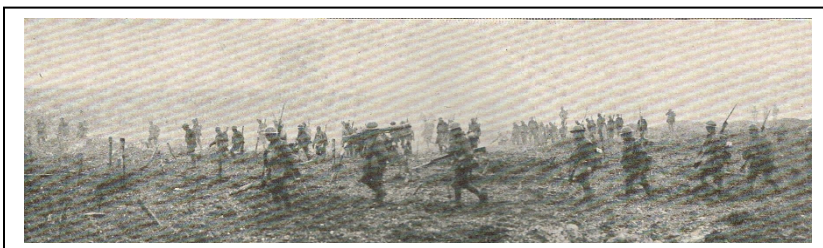
**While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive of *Le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.**

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

**On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity – there was even that British brigade operating under 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division command - stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.**

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

**(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*)**

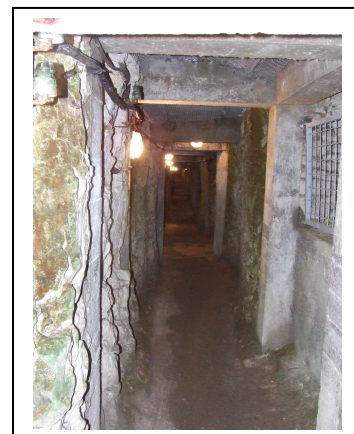


**Excerpts from 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for April 9, 1917:**

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

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

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



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

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion assault enjoyed only mixed results at first, even some of the successful attackers having been forced to retire because their flanks had become vulnerably exposed. Eventually, however, the advance had continued, one of the last actions having gone in at a quarter to seven in the evening to clear two more trenches of the enemy.

By the late evening of April 10 the Canadian Corps, having eliminated the few remaining pockets of resistance from the area of *Vimy Ridge*, now began to consolidate the area in anticipation of the expected German counter-attacks – which, in fact, were never to amount to very much.

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



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

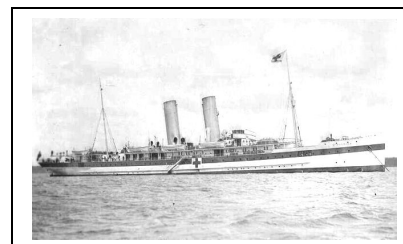
\* \* \* \* \*

It was on April 11, a day on which the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be relieved after its efforts of the previous days, that Corporal Pitman was wounded. He was reported as having incurred a gun-shot wound to his right hand and, after preliminary treatment, as having been evacuated to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Stationary Hospital – also known as the *Australian Voluntary Hospital* - in the coastal town of Wimereux adjacent to Boulogne. He was admitted there on the same April 11.



(Right above: *The coastal resort town of Wimereux just prior to the period of the Great War during which it was to become a major British and Commonwealth medical centre – from a vintage post-card*)

By April 13, only two days following, it had been decided that any further treatment should be done in the United Kingdom. Thus on that day and to that end Corporal Pitman was placed on board His Majesty’s Hospital Ship *St. Patrick* to be transported back across the Dover Straits.



(continued)

(Right above: *The image of the requisitioned ferry-boat St. Patrick is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

Once returned to England, he was transported to the Horton County of London War Hospital established in the county town of Epsom, in peace-time better known for its horse racing. At the same moment, at a bureaucratic level, he was transferred from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion to the nominal roll of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quebec Regimental Depot stationed on the south coast at Shoreham. Four weeks after that, his name was transferred to the roll of the 1<sup>st</sup> Quebec Regiment, its Depot situated at the same military complex.

As for Corporal Pitman himself, he was never to serve at either the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> Quebec Regimental Depots. After nine weeks of medical attention at Horton Hospital, on June 15 he was forwarded to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital, Woodcote Park, also situated in Epsom. From there he was to be discharged *to duty* just a week later.

On June 22, the day of his discharge, Corporal Pitman was taken on strength by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion (*Quebec*)\* which had been stationed at Shoreham since its organization in January some five months earlier.

*\*The unit was apparently also designated, by the time of Corporal Pitman's arrival, as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion (199<sup>th</sup> Duchess of Connaught's Own Irish Canadian Rangers)*

Corporal Pitman was now to spend almost nine months with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Reserve Battalion on England's south coast. It was not until March of the following year, 1918, that he was transferred *On Command* to *Camp Bramshott* in the county of Hampshire, there to work at the Segregation Camp\*.

*\*Troops arriving from Canada were to be segregated and quarantined in these areas to prevent the importation of infectious disease. By 1918, the threat of the Spanish Influenza was being taken seriously.*

On April 18, a further six weeks less a day after his arrival at *Camp Bramshott*, Corporal Pitman was ordered back to *active service* on the Continent. On that same night, April 18-19, he traversed the English Channel once more – again likely passing through Southampton and Le Havre – to arrive at the Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étapes later in the day of the 19<sup>th</sup>\* where he was *taken on strength* by his former 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

*\*This was the very day that the Canadian Infantry Base Depots were being re-organized so while no re-enforcements were recorded on that date, he may well have been one of the five-hundred seventy-eight documented on the morrow, April 20.*

On April 22 he was on his way to the Canadian Corps reinforcement Camp at Calonne-Ricouart, some eighty kilometres to the eastward, there to wait but six days before being ordered to join his unit *in the field*. Leaving the CCRC on April 28, he reported back *to duty* two days later, on the last day of the month – although the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary does not mention any arrivals either on or about that day - to the area of Méricourt where his unit had withdrawn from the front only the day before.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the twelve months of Corporal Pitman's enforced absence, his 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been busy. The relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* had still been in its opening phase at the time of his injury and there was still a lot of fighting to be done and a great deal more blood to be spilt. The weeks following were not to be fought in the manner of the first two days but by the end of that further period little was to have changed and the Germans were to have recovered from the initial Canadian success.

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had thus once more reverted to that routine of life in the trenches in the *Lens Sector*. June had been fairly active, particularly the evening of the eighth day of the month when three Canadian battalions, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion one of them, had fairly successfully raided the enemy lines. The 'Brass' was pleased: on the debit side was to be a count of one-hundred thirty-nine Battalion casualties.

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



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

The 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 his reserve troops - from that area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune down to Lens.



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

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

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



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

(continued)

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



*(Right: The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.)*

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

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



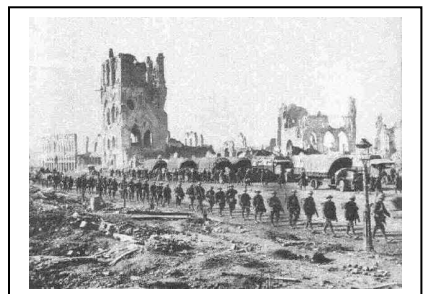
These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, which had been by then employing newly-developed tactical procedures, was to inflict heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* had remained in Canadian hands.



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

The assault on *Hill 70* had been made the responsibility of several formations of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions. The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, was therefore not to be directly involved in any part of this operation but, nonetheless, it had been active elsewhere in the outskirts of Lens during that same period, partially in the area of the Lens-Lievin Road where it today still crosses the Béthune to Lens railway line, and partially in the western outskirts of the city of Lens itself.

This Canadian-led offensive campaign had been scheduled 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 New Zealanders, and then the Canadians, were ordered to prepare to move north: thus the Canadian Corps was obliged to abandon its plans.

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

(continued)

In the middle of October the Canadians had been ordered to move north into Belgium and into the *Ypres Salient*. Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the end of that July – has since then come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having usurped that name from a small village on a ridge that had been – at least *ostensibly* - one of the British High Command’s objectives.

(Right: *Somewhere, perhaps anywhere or everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917. – from Illustration*)



From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it had been they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it had been the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions which were to spearhead the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions in reserve.

From November 5 until the official end of the affair – November 10 - the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)



(Right below: *Just a few hundred metres to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the above monument – this, according to the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary, is where the unit was in trenches on October 30 of 1917. – photograph from 2010*)



Meanwhile, October 11 had been the first day of the transfer of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, a move which was to bring it, after a year’s absence, and for a second occasion, into the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month the unit was to be in *Toronto Camp* in the area of Brandhoek, a village to the west of the city of Ypres itself and half way along the road from there to Poperinghe.



On the 27<sup>th</sup>, thirty-two officers and six-hundred eighteen *other ranks* of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been ordered moved to the vicinity of Potijze, to the north-east of Ypres where they were to be quartered in shelters and dugouts. There, for a further six days, they had been mostly engaged in providing working-parties and, at least on one day, were to furnish one-hundred men in order to stretcher or otherwise carry some of the many wounded to the rear.

(continued)

**(Preceding page: *Canadian troops performing their ablutions in the water collecting in a shell hole at some time during the last month of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)**

Back at Brandhoek on November 2, the unit had entrained on the following day for the journey to Cæstre in northern France. After further days of training and inspections, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had found itself back in *Toronto Camp*, Brandhoek, on November 10. From there it had been ordered to Ypres, from Ypres to Potijze, from Potijze to *Abraham Heights*, and from there to *Crest Farm* on the outskirts of the no-longer existent community of Passchendaele itself, all in the space of two days: there at *Crest Farm* the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had relieved the depleted companies of three other Canadian units.

According to the Battalion War Diary entry for November 16... *The total casualties for the tour were 4 Officers and 172 O.R. which is exceedingly heavy for four days in holding the line, and shows the intenseness of the situation in the vicinity of Passchendaele.* It had been an almost-cessless enemy artillery bombardment which had inflicted the vast majority of these losses on the unit.

On the next day, November 17, the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been relieved and had begun to retire to France – on foot and by motor transport. Six days again, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, after a march of some twenty-eight kilometres from Cantrainne, it was to be billeted in the proximity of La Thieuloye, to the north-west of Arras and well away from the forward area. By December 21, however, the Battalion had once more been posted to the front, on this occasion to the *Chaudière Sector* - and Christmas Day of 1917 turned out to be just another day served in the trenches\*.

*\*On December 3 and 4 the personnel of the Battalion was encouraged to exercise their right to vote in the Canadian National Election ongoing at the time. Also offered was the opportunity to invest in War Bonds, thus allowing those fighting in the conflict the opportunity to pay for it as well.*

**(Right below: *The Canadian National Monument on Vimy Ridge as seen looking southwards from the Chaudière Sector: On April 9, 1917, this area lay behind the German lines – photograph from 1914*)**

In contrast to Christmas, New Year's Eve had been celebrated by everyone taking the train to Neuville St-Vaast for a bath!

Much of January, most of February and the first two weeks of March, 1918, had been for the most part a quiet time, not only for the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion but indeed for the greater part of the Canadian 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. On March 12 the unit had been preparing to leave *Alberta Camp* to return to the Front. They were now to once again be posted to the *Lens Sector*.

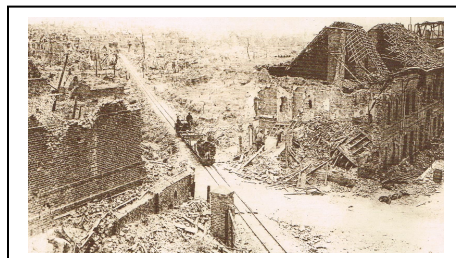


Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans were to come to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the war, they had delivered a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', launched on March 21.

The main blow had fallen at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it had descended for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops stationed there\* in the areas adjacent to French forces.

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

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



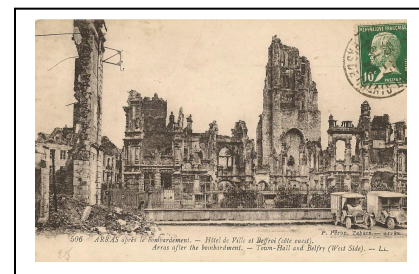
*\*A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29<sup>th</sup> Division. It also was successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*

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



(Right below: *The venerable City Hall of Arras and its bell-tower looked like this by the spring of 1918 after nearly four years of bombardment by German artillery. – from a vintage post-card*)

It would appear that the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had remained *in situ* in the *Lens Sector* until the end of the month of March when it had been transferred some kilometres south to the *Arras Sector*, before then having been moved back and forth in the area to the north of the city itself. The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not to be posted to *the Somme* to staunch the German onslaught of that spring; the unit had remained in the region to the north and north-west of Arras.



But its transfer there to Arras – and the similar transfer of other Canadian units – had allowed the British troops previously stationed there to move south to the area of the battle, and it had also ensured the defence of Arras in the event of a German decision to switch their attack further to the north.

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had still been close to the same area, posted to the *Méricourt Sector*, at the end of the month of April which was the time when Corporal Pitman had reported to *duty* from the not-far-distant Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp at Calonne-Ricouard.

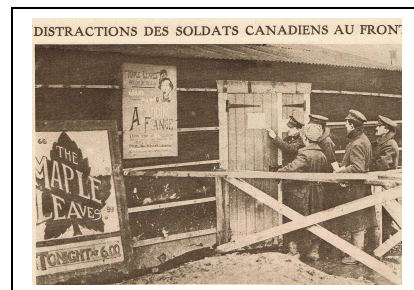
(continued)

\* \* \* \* \*



A further four weeks were now to pass, at first in the forward area and then in training at Mingoal before, in the final week of that month of May, 1918, Private Pitman's 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered to be withdrawn to the security of Valhuon – well to the west and far removed from the Front - for a period of some six weeks.

Those weeks must have been as close to a holiday as it ever was in any army during the *Great War*: Training there was, inspections there were, drills at platoon, company, battalion and brigade level there were, as well as lectures and courses on such things as new weaponry and the latest in gas warfare; but there were also regular baths, changes of clothing and, of course, meals. To this was also to be added concerts, inter-unit competitions in military skills and sports of divers kinds.



And short though it might be, there was a regular night's sleep - luxury indeed.

(Right above: *Canadian soldiers peruse the program of an upcoming concert somewhere behind the lines of the Western Front. – from Le Miroir*)

On July 10 Corporal Pitman and his comrades-in-arms left all this behind and moved on foot and by train to the community of St. Aubin north of Arras. On the next morning they moved to an area close to Roclincourt, a village situated half-way between Vimy village and the city of Arras from where, after a meal, the unit moved into front-line trenches. The transfer took place in daylight hours, an unusual procedure, yet the enemy had remained docile and the move had been completed by five o'clock on that afternoon of July 11.

The following six days comprised little infantry activity apart from patrols and working parties and as a consequence few casualties were reported: according to the Battalion War Diarist in his entry after relief on July 17...*Casualties for the tour, 2 O.R. slightly wounded.*

Corporal Pitman's first experience of front-line trench warfare had been an easy one – perhaps even a misleading one.

Five days later again the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion had returned to the front near Roclincourt - on this occasion to take part in two raids to inflict casualties and to obtain information – until it in turn was relieved on the final day of the month. Notwithstanding the infantry incursions into enemy territory, casualties during this last week of July were still reported as having been light.



(Right above: *Arras Road Cemetery, Roclincourt, in which lie a number of Canadian dead and at least one Newfoundlander who wore a Canadian uniform – photograph from 2014(?)*)

All this, however, was to soon change during the month of August. Under the new Allied Generalissimo, Foch, an immense offensive was being prepared to push the Germans back whence they had come some four months previously – and beyond\*.



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

*\*In fact, multiple offensives were being prepared, one of which, a French effort, had already begun.*

*Nobody knew it at the time, of course, and perhaps, after four years of static warfare, no one dared to think it, but this campaign - to become known as the Hundred Days – was to end with the Armistice of November 11 of 1918. (Although by that time there would be several such agreements as the Central Powers one by one were to leave the field.)*

In the previous April the German spring offensive had almost reached the gates of Amiens in the south and had advanced towards the Channel ports in the north before being stopped. That area in front of Amiens was to be the jumping-off point for the Allied attack of August 8\*, thus the early days of August saw a great transfer of Canadian troops from the area north-west of Arras to the new theatre of battle some ninety kilometres to the south. The move was to be rapid – and to be cloaked in secrecy.

(Right: *The great gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – The edifice houses a flag and other commemorations of the sacrifice of the Dominion of Newfoundland – photograph from 2007(?)*)



*\*It was to be the end of September before the Allied counter-attack would commence in the north on the front in Flanders where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving.*

The 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion left its quarters in the proximity of Écoivres and Mont St-Éloi on the evening of August 3 and was bussed some one-hundred twenty kilometres before it dismounted at four-thirty on the following morning in, or close to, the community of Oisemont – still at a distance of forty-seven kilometres from Amiens.



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

Private Pitman's Battalion was then billeted in or in the vicinity of the villages of Heucourt and Prouzel on successive days having marched by night, before, on August 6... *The Brigade Group began its move to concentration area BOIS DE BOVES. At five o'clock on the afternoon of the next day again the Brigade began a further, final movement into the BOIS DE GENTELLES.*



Excerpt from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry of August 8, 1917: *Notification received that zero hour was to be 4.20 A.M. and at 5.30 A.M. the Battalion started to move. It moved around the south end of the GENTELLES WOOD and then south and parallel to the ROYE Road, crossing the RIVER LUCE and taking up a position along Old German trench system... From here it could be seen that our attack was progressing favourably and many prisoners were being sent back. The Battalion moved again at 9.20 A.M...*



(Right above: *The remnants of the community of Roye, this picture taken in 1917, even before the events of 1918 – from a vintage post-card*)

The attack of August 8 was for the most part a great success – the Canadians having advanced an unheard-of eleven kilometres. The 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion, however, had had difficulties in attaining its objectives, and Private Pitman's 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion, having been held in reserve on August 8, was now ordered to act in conjunction with the 75<sup>th</sup> Battalion during the night of August 8-9 and the next morning: the 75<sup>th</sup> was to make a frontal attack while two companies of the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion were to outflank the enemy positions



(Right above: *The caption records this as being a photograph of German prisoners taken by the Canadians, some of them carrying a wounded officer – Allied or German officer is not documented. Also to be noted is one of the newer tanks. – from Le Miroir*)



(Right above: *Hillside Cemetery, Le Quesnel, within the bounds of which lie many dead of the opening days of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Amiens, including at least two Newfoundlanders wearing Canadian uniforms – photograph from 2015*)

Excerpts from the 87<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for August 8 and 9, 1918: *The two Coys chosen were "B" and "D" Coys...and these Coys moved off to their tasks at 11.45 P.M. On account of the darkness and the thick wood, they experienced great difficulty in reaching their jumping off position. "D" Coy, however, succeeded in starting their advance at 4.35 A.M. and "B" Coy at 5.30 A.M. At 10.55 A.M. they had reached a line 200 yards east of road... On account of heavy Machine Gun fire from the enemy they experienced great difficulty in getting further forward. Tanks were sent forward at 11.15 A.M. but were of no assistance in clearing up the situation. At 12.30 P.M. the enemy started to retire, and "B" and "D" Coys followed up, occupying their objective...*

*Our casualties during the attack were...two officers...wounded, 10 O.R's killed and 42 O.R's wounded... The following O.R's were buried at the locations shown...177911 Cpl Pittman R. ...*

(continued)

**Casualty Report – “Killed in Action” – *While taking part in the attack on Le Quesnel village he was wounded in the thigh, and while lying on the ground he was hit in the head by an enemy rifle bullet and instantly killed.***

**The son of Thomas\* (of Robert) Pittman (sic), fisherman, and of Elizabeth Anne Pittman (née Withers, deceased of consumption December 4, 1906), he was also brother to Joseph, Anthony, Ann-Elizabeth, Mary-Ann, Suzanna and Nicholas\*\*.**

***\*Thomas Pittman and his son Robert, are both recorded in the 1911 Census as working in the colliery at New Waterford, Cape Breton, as lodging with the West family in the same community, and as having emigrated from Newfoundland in the year 1908.***

***Thomas, however, appears to have returned to Marystown as that is the address given by Robert Pittman as that of his father and next-of-kin on his attestation papers.***

***\*\*There appear to be some contradictions in the available information and the above family data could use confirmation.***

**Corporal Pitman was reported as having been *killed in action* on August 9 of 1918, the second day of the *3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Amiens*.**

**Robert Pitman had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and four months: date of birth in Marystown, Newfoundland, July 18, 1893 (from attestation papers). Other sources, however – *Ancestry* and the 1911 Census – cite the year as having been 1892, *Ancestry* having the date as September 5, the Census having June as being the month.**

**Corporal Robert Pitman was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).**

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

