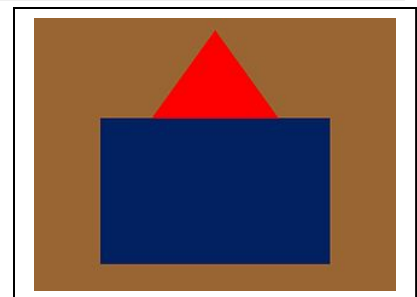




Private Robert Reeves Pyke (Number 68463) of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in La Laiterie Military Cemetery, Belgium: Grave reference III.A.12.

(Right: *The image of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner, Robert Reeves Pike has left behind him in his personal file no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to that of Canada. All that can be said with certainty is that during the late winter and early spring of 1915, he was residing in the area of Sydney Mines, Cape Breton, in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, for this was when and where he enlisted.

Robert Reeves was to undergo two medical examinations: the first at Sydney Mines on April 30; the second on May 19 in Halifax, just prior to sailing for overseas service. On the second report, the date of his enlistment is cited as February 2, some three months previous.

Having enlisted, it is not certain whether he was immediately attached to a military unit – in fact, the first pay records in his file do not commence until May 16, but he was surely a soldier in the Canadian Army by that time.

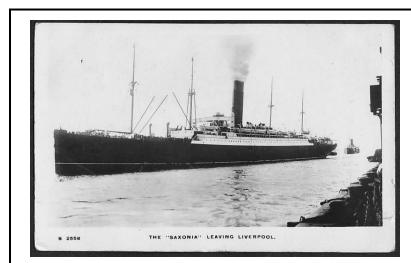
On April 30, the date of his first medical examination, Robert Reeves was also attested – the magistrate did not confirm this until May 8 – and both this oath, and thus his enlistment previous to it, were witnessed by the commanding officer of the 40th Battalion (*Nova Scotia*), Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Vincent, who then declared, on paper, that...*Robert Pyke, having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Once the formalities of his enlistment had taken place at Sydney Mines, Private Pyke was not to remain there for long. On May 11 the Battalion was despatched to the military camp at Aldershot in the Annapolis Valley for further training but – once again – if Private Pyke was one of those to be assembled at Aldershot, it was not to be for long *either*.

Only days before the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) was due to sail for the United Kingdom from Halifax, the unit's War Diary entry for May 16 records the following: *75 Men enlisted to take the place of men discharged as medically unfit or undesirable.*

Given that his records show that this was the date on which the paymaster of the 25th Battalion began to remunerate him for his services, it is surely more than just likely that Private Pyke was one of those seventy-five to be *taken on strength* on that May 16.

Four days later – and the day after his second medical examination – on May 20, 1915, the 25th Battalion embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia* in Halifax.



(Right above: *The image of the Royal Mail Ship Saxonia leaving the port of Liverpool is from the Wikipedia web-site. Requisitioned by the British for government service she was deployed for use early in the conflict as a floating prisoner-of-war camp before seeing use as a troop transport as of 1915.*)

(continued)

Private Pyke's unit was not to travel overseas alone: also taking passage on board the vessel were the 22nd Battalion of Canadian Infantry and a part 2nd Divisional Ammo Park. According to the 25th Battalion War Diary again, *Saxonia* had taken on board a total of twenty-two hundred seventy-four *all ranks*.

At about six o'clock in the evening of that May 20, the last of the 22nd Battalion having marched up its gangways, the ship sailed from Halifax. Some nine days later, at ten minutes past four o'clock in the morning of May 29, and after an uneventful voyage, the vessel docked in the English south-coast naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport.



(Right: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it was to become almost a century after the Great War – and a lot less busy nowadays - photograph from 2013*)

Upon its arrival in England the 25th Battalion was transported eastwards by train to *East Sandling Camp* on the Kentish coast. This was a subsidiary camp in the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe* being established at the time on the Dover Straits, in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone. At the time it was also where the newly-forming 2nd Canadian Division was being assembled and organized before its transfer across the Straits to the Continent.



However, for eight days during that summer, Private Pyke was being neither organized nor assembled: he was being treated for a venereal complaint in the tent hospital on Saint Martin's Plain, *Shorncliffe* – from July 15 to 22.

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

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) was a component of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of that 2nd Canadian Division. The 1st Canadian Division had been serving on the Continent since February six months earlier, having been deployed in northern France and in the *Kingdom of Belgium* during that time, and had distinguished itself during the *2nd Battle of Ypres* in the spring of that same year. By the late summer of 1915 it was now the turn of the 2nd Canadian Division also to take a place in the line.



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

On September 15, 1915, the 25th Battalion marched from *Shorncliffe Camp* in the late afternoon en route for Folkestone where the unit boarded a troop transport for the short crossing to the Continent.

Sailing at ten o'clock that same evening, the troops disembarked in the French port of Boulogne two hours later, at one o'clock in the morning*.

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

**There is a one-hour time difference between the United Kingdom and France.*

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

Later, on that same September 16, and after several hours rest, the 25th Battalion marched to meet transport which was to take them into northern France, not far from the frontier with Belgium, and not far distant from the large centre of Hazebrouk. Three days later the unit crossed into Belgium.

By September 23, the Nova Scotia Unit was relieving a British unit, the 2nd Battalion, *the King's Own*, in trenches close to the Franco-Belgian border in the area of the Kemmel-Ypres Road.

(Right above: *Troops – in this instance British, the King's Regiment (Liverpool) – in hastily-dug trenches in the Ypres Sector. These are still the early days of the year as witnessed by the lack of steel helmets which came into use only in the spring and summer of 1916. – from Illustration*)

The following months were to be a relatively quiet period for all the troops of both sides in the trenches in Belgium; there was, of course, a steady trickle of casualties, usually due to enemy artillery fire and to his snipers, but until the spring of 1916 there was to be only the daily grind of the infantryman's life in – and out of – 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.

(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the next year, 1916, but by that time equipped with steel helmets and also the less-evident British-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)

On November 9 the 25th Battalion had relieved the 24th Battalion in the trenches having just spent five days in billets in the area of the community of Kemmel. Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for November 10, 1915: *Rainy day. Two O.R. Killed and four O.R. wounded in action.*



(Right: Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery in the bounds of which are buried eighty soldiers who served in Canadian units – photograph from 2014)

Casualty report: Killed in Action – While on duty in the front line trenches near Wytschaete he was hit in the stomach by an enemy rifle bullet which penetrated to his spine rendering him unconscious. His comrades dressed his wound but he died shortly afterwards.

The son of Alfred Pyke (mostly found as *Pike*), fisherman, and of Susannah Pyke (née *Poster**) – to whom, as of June 1, 1915, he had allotted the monthly sum of seventeen dollars from his pay – he was also brother to at least Giles, Joseph and Frederick.

**This family name is not to be found in the records of the time for the Church of England, District of Burin – could it be Roberts or Porter?*

Private Pyke of 'B' Company was reported as having been *killed in action* on November 10, 1915, while serving in the trenches in Belgium.

Robert Reeves Pyke had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-three years: date of birth – from attestation papers - in St. Lawrence, Newfoundland, May 10, 1892. However, the website of *Newfoundland Registration Pike Births* cites his birth on November 21, 1893. Given that Burin Parish Records have recorded his brother Giles as born on November 9, 1891, the latter above date appears the more likely of the two.

Private Robert Reeves Pyke (also *Pike*) was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) 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 26, 2023.