



Unfortunately no photograph of Sergeant Rees' grave is available, likely due to an oversight by the author. Because of present - Spring 2021 – circumstances, it may be some time before it is possible to obtain the required image – but it shall be done.

The above photographs are of Brookwood Cemetery in the county of Surrey and taken in 2011 and 2017.

(continued)

Sergeant Eldred Rees (Number 114621) of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles is buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery: grave reference III. D. 3..

(Right: *The image of a cap badge of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *motorman* (street-car driver), Eldred Rees appears to have left behind him no history of his travels from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Dominion of Canada.

Trooper* Rees' first pay records show August 11 of 1915 to be the day on which the Canadian Army first remunerated him for his services, thus suggesting this to be the day on which he enlisted, the event followed by his attestation, this to be confirmed by a local Justice of the Peace or magistrate. On that same day he was *taken on strength* by the 9th Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles, of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

**The mounted equivalent of Private*

Only two days later, on August 13 at Sewell Manitoba, Trooper Rees then underwent a medical examination, a procedure which found him...*fit for overseas service*...and subsequently the approval of both his enlistment and attestation.

Thereupon the formalities of the entire procedure were brought to an official conclusion by the officer commanding the 9th Regiment, CMR, Lieutenant-Colonel George Cuthbert Hodson, when he declared – on paper – that...*Eldred Rees, having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**The venue of his enlistment during that August of 1915 was Sewell, perhaps the community of that name or perhaps Sewell Military Camp, to be found some ten kilometres to the west of the town of Carberry – perhaps both.*

The 9th Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles trained at the above-mentioned *Sewell Military Camp* (in 1915 re-named *Camp Hughes*), much of it a tented affair, until the call came for the unit to leave for...*overseas service*. During this period the recruits were to be vaccinated before their departure. Such was the case with Trooper Rees, except that he apparently had a reaction to the inoculation and was obliged to enter hospital on August 31, there to remain for a week.



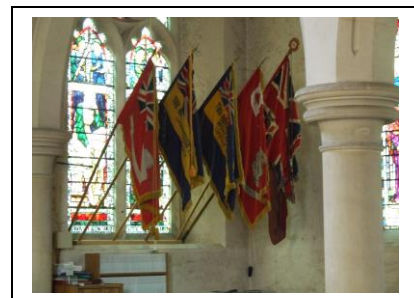
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(Preceding page: *Personnel of the 9th Regiment CMR on horseback at Camp Sewell in 1915: from the WARTIMES.ca web-site.*)



On November 22 of that 1915, having crossed much of the country by train, the some twenty-seven officers and just fewer than six-hundred *other ranks* embarked onto the SS *California** in the harbour of Saint John, New Brunswick. The vessel sailed for the United Kingdom on the morrow.

(Right above: *The image of California is from the 'Wikipedia' web-site. The ship, built in 1907, is not to be confused with the SS Californian of Titanic notoriety, which had been torpedoed and sunk only two weeks less a day before, on November 9. However, the vessel shown above was also to be lost off the coast of Ireland to a U-boat, in February of 1917, with a loss of forty-one lives.*)



On December 3, ten days later, the ship docked in the English south-coast harbour and naval complex of Plymouth-Devonport. From there, having disembarked, Trooper Rees and his fellow-soldiers were carried by train to the not-distant – in Canadian terms – *Camp Bramshott*, the facility coming into being near the villages of Liphook and Bramshott – whence, obviously, the name - in the southern county of Hampshire, to arrive there during that night.

There the newcomers were to complete training before being dispatched across the English Channel to...*active service*...on the Continent.

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

The aforesaid training continued for some two months until the end of January – thus that Christmas and the arrival of the New Year were both celebrated at *Bramshott*. Then on January 28, 1916, Trooper Rees was...*Struck off Strength*...by the 9th Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles in view of his imminent departure to France, where he was to join a battalion of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade (see further below).

He was to travel from *Camp Bramshott* later that day, to cross the Channel likely from Southampton on that night and to report to the Canadian Infantry Base Depot* established by that time at Rouelles, in the vicinity of the French industrial city of Le Havre. Upon arrival he was...*Taken on Strength*...by the 5th (no longer *Regiment* but *Battalion* – see further below) of the Canadian Mounted Rifles.

**The War Diary of the Canadian General Base Depot records a draft of 429 personnel reporting on January 29 and one of 465 on the following day, January 30, both having arrived from the Canadian Camp at Shornecliffe although individual records of soldiers such as Trooper Rees formerly of the 9th CMR show that at least some of these numbers had been transferred from Bramshott.*

On that January 30 there were 2675 re-enforcements at the Canadian General Base Depot awaiting dispatch to their various new units. The entry o the Depot's War Diary for February 7, 1916, the day of Trooper Rees' dispatch, reads as follows: *Draft of 830 other ranks C.M.R.s left for the front with 9 conducting officers. This was without exception the worst equipped draft from England**.

**The above entry is in reference to the drafts from England – perhaps inevitably including personnel of Trooper Rees' detachment – which upon arrival at the General Base Depot on January 29-30 had been described thus: 'This draft was very badly equipped. 351 Jackets had to be exchanged; and 117 pairs of Boots had also to be exchanged (a few pairs were unserviceable). 60 men had no A.F.W3066 pasted in their Pay-Books. 262 men had rifles but no bayonets. 408 Woolen vests had to be issued as a Free-Issue'.*

Trooper Rees and his re-enforcement draft reported...to duty...on February 8 to the 5th Battalion, CMR, which had retired from *the Front* on only the day before to the vicinity of Kortepyp, a village on the Franco-Belgian frontier. There the newcomers were soon to be made busy carrying materials – sand-bags, dug-out frames, wire, stakes and the like – for use in the construction of trenches, parapets, listening-posts and defences in general.

* * * * *

The 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, originally recruited in the area of the Eastern Townships of Québec, was a component of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade*, itself an element of the 3rd Canadian Division. The 3rd Division had begun to form in France in December of 1915 – officially coming into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1, 1916. By that time, the 5th CMR had been on the Continent for some two months, since October 24, 1915.



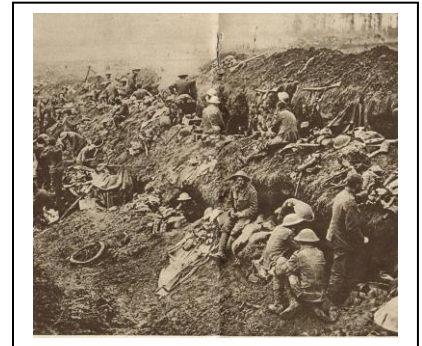
**All of the 8th Brigade's four infantry battalions, as of January 1, 1916, were dis-mounted Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Battalions. Prior to that, the 5th Regiment, CMR, had been a unit of the 2nd Mounted Rifle Brigade and the troopers had, as the name implies, horses. In order to become an infantry battalion, not only were the Regiment's horses sent elsewhere – often to officers serving behind the lines – but the Regiment, not being of regular infantry battalion strength, had to absorb personnel from other Mounted Regiments, units which, while not immediately disbanded, were thereafter no longer active. Thus on January 1, 1916, the CMR Regiments became CMR Battalions.*

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

From the end of October of that 1915, until almost a year later in 1916 (see below), the 5th CMR was to be stationed in Belgium; at first it had served at the southern end of the front there, just before the trenches crossed southward over the frontier into France – Messines and Kortepyp, right on the border, in the forward area and Meteren to the rear are three place-names which often appear in the Battalion War Diary.

It was in places such as these, all in Belgian Flanders, that Trooper Rees and the personnel of the 5th CMR Battalion were to learn about the rigours, the routines and the perils of 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 being the 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 posting at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops, perhaps 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)

And it had been, of course, during the earlier part of this above-cited period, in February of 1916, while the 5th Battalion of the CMR had been serving in the area of the frontier, that Trooper Rees and his re-enforcement draft from *Rouelles Camp*, the Canadian General Base Depot, had reported to join the unit.

* * * * *

Some seven weeks after the arrival of Trooper Rees' draft, his battalion had been transferred to the vicinity of *Maple Copse* in the *Ypres Salient*, in a sector just south-east of Ypres (today *leper*) itself (to be seen below).

**The entire 3rd Canadian Division was transferred to the Salient at the end of March of 1916, the 5th CMR Battalion marching through Ypres to its new positions on March 24.*

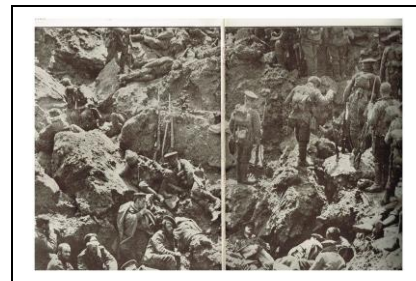
The sector surrounding *Maple Copse*, having at this time become the responsibility of the 3rd Canadian Division, comprised such places as the village of *Hooge*, and others that were soon to go by English names such as *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Mount Sorrel*, a promontory which was to lend its name to the upcoming confrontation.

But first, in April, it had been the 2nd Canadian Division, in a sector to the south of Ypres and towards the Franco-Belgian frontier, which was to receive the attention of the German Army for a few days. This period was not to be as tranquil for 2nd Division personnel as that being experienced during the same time by the officers and *other ranks* of the 5th CMR Battalion and the other units of the Canadian 3rd 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 series of galleries under the German lines, there to place quantities of explosives which they detonated on that March 27 and followed up with an infantry assault.

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then 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.



(Right: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

However, as previously noted, this confrontation was a 2nd Division affair and Trooper Rees and the other personnel of the 5th CMR Battalion during that period would likely have been disturbed by only the noise of the German artillery some kilometres away.

However, it was to be only some seven weeks after this action that the relative calm of the the 3rd Canadian Division's trenches in the south-east Sector of the *Ypres Salient* was to be shattered by the German attack at *Mount Sorrel*.

It was from June 2 to 13-14 that the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel* - and in the area of *Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Hooge, Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* - between the German Army and the Canadian Corps was played out.

The Canadians had apparently 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 chose to – or could - exploit.



(Right: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010*)

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

On that June 2, 1916, the 5th CMR had been serving in Brigade Support at *Maple Copse*, having been posted there since the night of May 31-June 1.

The following are excerpts taken from the War Diary of the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifle Battalion entry of June 2, 1916: *A red letter day in the history of the Battalion, ever to be remembered by those who lived through it. In the early morning, enemy sprung a mine in part of line held by 4th CMR Battalion and began a bombardment of the Brigade area... and all the ground in MAPLE COPSE and vicinity. The men were kept under cover as much as possible...*



...Several attempts were made to get in touch with the front line but without success. Runners sent out by us... were killed or returned wounded, with news that the communications trenches had been blown in, and that it was impossible to get through enemy barrage fire...

(Right above: *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*)

A new defensive front line was organized later that day, to be consolidated as much as possible before being used as a jumping-off position for the counter-attack which began at ten minutes past seven on the following morning, June 3.

It is not clear exactly what role the 5th CMR played: it held *Maple Copse* all day during a bombardment so intense that apparently no-one could ascertain precisely what was happening elsewhere; attempts were also made to communicate with the survivors of the 4th CMR Battalion which had been holding the front-line at the time of the attack but which had been isolated ever since that time.



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

Later that evening, when the 5th CMR had been relieved and was ordered to retire, it was found to have incurred a total of three-hundred ninety-three casualties. The 8th Canadian infantry Brigade during those same two days, June 2 and 3, had incurred a total one-thousand nine-hundred fifty – an almost fifty per cent casualty rate.

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



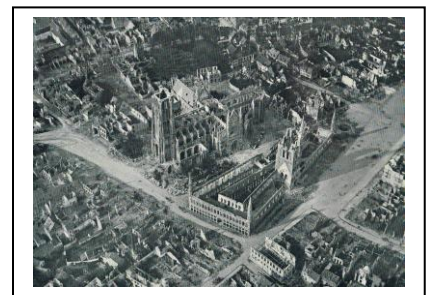
So severe had the losses been that neither the 8th Brigade – and thus not the 5th CMR Battalion – played any further role in the action at *Mount Sorrel*.

From June 5 when the unit withdrew, until July 16, the 5th CMR Battalion had stayed in the area of Steenvoorde, a French community well to the rear, there to re-enforce and also to re-organize. It was not until the 19th, having at first travelled by train before marching through the south-eastern outskirts of Ypres itself, that it once more took its place in the forward area close to Zillebeke, just down the line to the west of the area of *Maple Copse*.

There for four days, with little or no infantry action reported, the unit still incurred ten *killed*, twelve *wounded* and eight *shell-shocked*. Thus the routine of trench warfare re-commenced with the Battalion closer to Ypres itself during this cycle than it had been previously.

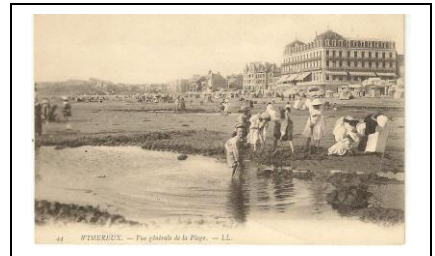
(Right below: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)

On August 22 the War Diarist had noticed – and noted – an influx of British and Irish troops in the sector, units which had been transferred from a place called *the Somme*. These troops were soon relieving the Canadians who were being withdrawn from Belgium. On August 23 it was to be the turn of the 5th CMR and, as if to mark a special occasion... *Baths at POPERINGHE allotted to Battalion from 7.30 am until 12 noon, accommodation 150 per hour.*



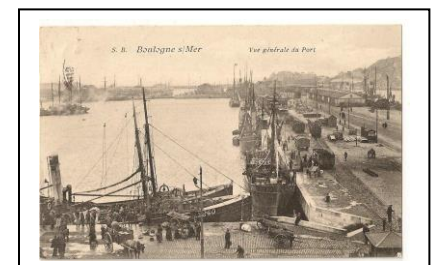
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Whether or not Trooper Rees was to have a well-earned bath on that occasion is not clear as on that date he was to be sent to hospital with that most-common complaint, PUO - (Pain - or Pyrexia (*fever*) – of unknown origin). The centre to which he was evacuated was the Number 8 Stationary Hospital in or in the vicinity of the sea-side town of Wimereux.



(Right above: *The French coastal resort of Wimereux – the community to become part of an important medical complex during the conflict – at some time just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

A week later, on the penultimate day of that August, Trooper Rees was transferred to the Number 1 Convalescent Depot in nearby Boulogne where he was to remain for a week less a day before being forwarded on September 6 to a further convalescent camp, Number 5, at Cayeux, some seventy kilometres southward down the coast.



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

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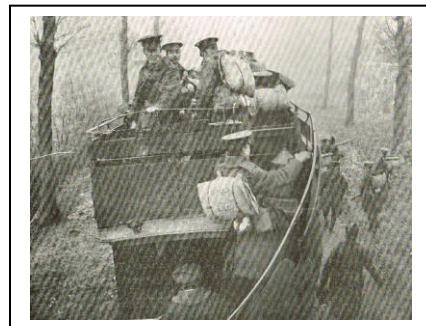
Discharged from Cayeux a month later, on October 6, he was ordered further south again and back to the Canadian General Base Depot where he had served only seven months prior. Trooper Rees was to re-join his unit from there on October 30, two weeks after the 5th CMR had retired from the front lines and then, on the following day, October 15, had begun to withdraw entirely from the still-ongoing *Battle of the Somme* (see below).

By October 30 the battalion had been serving in the Divisional Reserve for five days in the area of Etrun, a community to the west of the medieval city of Arras, having arrived there by a circuitous route by train and on foot from *the Somme* and its quarters of the night of October 14-15 at Albert.

It was a day on which not only was Trooper Rees to present himself but so also, according to the Battalion War Diarist, was the Duke of Connaught who, until that November 11, was still the Governor-General of Canada.

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Some two months before this time, following Trooper Rees' departure for medical attention and also its afore-mentioned collective bath of August 23, the 5th CMR Battalion had been ordered withdrawn to the area of North Steenvoorde in north-western France where it was to remain until September 7. The area had been transformed into a training-zone for what was to be optimistically termed by its planners as *open warfare* and myriad drills and practices were to be performed, from the section and platoon level up to - and including - that of both battalion and brigade.



On that September 7 the thirty-seven officers and eight-hundred ninety *other ranks* of the 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, had been taken by bus to board a train at Bavinghove for the journey south.

(Right above: *A number of the public London busses were requisitioned as troop transport during the Great War. Here one is being used by some lucky troops while others, to the right, are obliged to continue on foot. – from Illustration*)

The train had pulled out of Bavinghove Station at nine minutes to ten on that evening and pulled *into* the station at Candas at eight o'clock the next morning. After breakfast in a field there had begun a march which was to last some five days and which would end on September 12 in Brigade Reserve at La Boisselle*, the remnants of a village just to the east of the provincial town and centre of Albert.



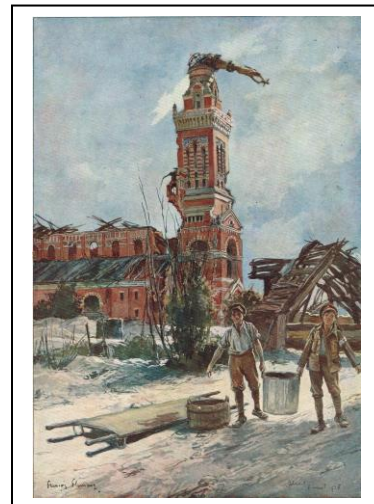
**Today the village of La Boisselle is known for the huge crater which remains there a century after the detonation of the largest of the nineteen mines exploded just prior to the attack of July 1. At the time it was perhaps history's largest man-made explosion. The crater, now more than a hundred years old, is still impressive, even today.*

(Preceding page: *The aforementioned Lochnagar Crater caused by the mine – apparently the largest man-made explosion in history up until that date – which was detonated at La Boisselle on the morning of July 1, 1916 – photograph from 2011(?)*)

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, the assault having cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the space of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

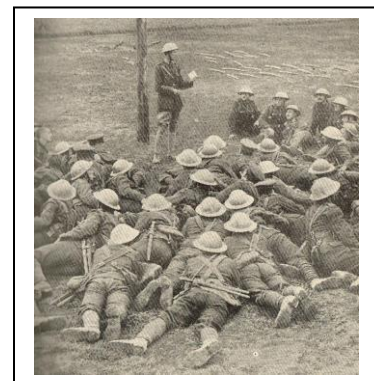
(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work carrying water in the centre of Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

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 July 1, 1916, at Beaumont-Hamel.



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 had in their turn 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.

(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*)



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

It was to be early on the morning of September 14 that the *5th CMR Battalion* had finished relieving the *4th CMR* whose place it had thereupon taken in the lines and from where it had been ordered to advance on the next morning.



The Battalion had been... *ordered to attack and consolidate, with two companies, the German trenches...and to bomb down...the trenches and establish blocks. These trenches to be held by Infantry Posts as they were cleared by the bombers* (Excerpt from the *8th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary*).

During the time of the relief and also for the remainder of that September 14, the Germans had reacted violently to the movement and to the obvious offensive preparations ongoing on the Canadian side of *No Man's Land*. The unit was to incur a number of casualties during the day.

By 4.00 a.m. all assaulting troops were in positions, and all details in regard to the attack completed... 6.20 a.m. As soon as the barrage lifted the 5th CMR BATTALION attacked in two waves and two full Sections of Battalion bombers...

Objective was reached with few casualties. The trenches were found to have been well manned. Twenty prisoners and three machine guns were taken, about 250 Germans were bayoneted and a large number retreated overland to FABECK GRABEN and were caught by our Machine gun fire (8th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary)...

This somewhat optimistic appraisal of events by the War Diarist notwithstanding, the *few casualties* that the Battalion had incurred totalled two-hundred seventy-seven *killed, wounded and missing* during the day. The 5th CMR Battalion had remained in its newly-won positions until the following evening when it was to be relieved under cover of darkness and would be able to retire to the large military camp at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in the outskirts of Albert.



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

From then until the end of the month, the 5th Battalion, CMR, had been kept in reserve, largely in the area of Bouzincourt. Nevertheless, while out of range of most German ordnance, there was to be little rest and the unit's personnel had been kept busy, much of the time in road construction; even while the Canadian 1st and 2nd Divisions were once more on the offensive and the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade had been in reserve, the Battalion's services were not called upon.

It was finally to be on September 27 that the 5th CMR Battalion would be ordered up to the forward area once more, whereupon it had moved forward on its way to relieve the 1st CMR Battalion in the front line on September 30.

Further orders were awaiting the unit: *Tomorrow afternoon at about 3 pm we are to attack, capture and consolidate a line of German trench known as REGINA TRENCH. As the front of our objective is well wired the artillery have been heavily engaged today endeavouring to cut the wire. Patrols are to be pushed out as far as possible after dark and report on the cutting. All ranks keyed up and in fine spirits, very eager to attack (5th CMR Battalion War Diary – excerpt from entry of September 30).*



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On October 1 the 5th CMR Battalion had attacked as planned and initially had achieved some success, certain German positions being overrun and captured. However, much of the wire that the artillery had been engaged the day before in destroying still remained uncut; *this* and several enemy counter-attacks were to put increasing pressure on those in the captured German positions.

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

Much of the newly-won terrain would be re-taken by the enemy, the Canadian survivors obliged to retreat to their former positions... and *Regina Trench* itself was to remain – apart from a few hours later during that month, on October 27 – in German hands until November 11.



At about ten o'clock on that evening of October 1, the Battalion had been relieved by the Royal Canadian Regiment and had fallen back to Albert where it was to be billeted. The efforts of the day had cost another two-hundred twenty-four casualties.

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

For the next number of days the Battalion had remained *in situ*, often supplying working-parties for work on roads in the area of Pozières. It had not been until the night of October 9-10 that the unit had moved forward once more to the front line. It had thereupon been ordered to remain there for the following day while the Canadian artillery was to cut the German wire in preparation for an offensive operation.

That day in the trenches had been punctuated by a working-party being sent to dig a jumping-off trench and by German guns accurately shelling the Battalion's positions. Apparently those positions were also to be shelled by the Canadian guns who had been inaccurately bombarding the German wire: these *shorts* had inevitably caused *Canadian* casualties and the German wire – reported by patrols as being some four-foot high – had remained unscathed.

Any offensive action now appears to have been either cancelled as far as the 5th Battalion CMR was concerned, since it had then been withdrawn to Albert in the late evening of October 11. It had arrived there just in time to receive orders for it to move back to the lines two days later, during the afternoon of the 13th. The tour was to be of short duration as the Battalion would soon be relieved by a British unit and was to be back in billets in Arras by mid-night of October 14-15.

For the Canadian unit, whether its personnel was aware of it at the time or not, the *First Battle of the Somme* had come to an end. On the morrow afternoon the entire 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade would begin to withdraw to the west.

It had continued westward for a single day before boarding a train at Acheux and being transported to Candas. There the Battalion had remained until October 20 when it began to march via Finvillers, Autheux and Outrebois to Ransart; then through Arbres, Rebreuve, Honval and Sibiville to arrive in Sericourt; thence by Runeville and Ternas to Tinquies; thence to Savy to finally arrive at Étrun on October 25 where it was to commence training, to re-organize and to re-enforce until the end of the month. Etrun was where, as seen in an earlier paragraph, it was to be on October 30 when Trooper Rees had reported...to duty...from the Base Depot at Le Havre.

By November 1 the 5th Battalion CMR – with Trooper Rees now once more among its ranks, was to be back serving in front-line positions, still in the area of Étrun.

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Its route away from *the Somme* had taken the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles by a semi-circular itinerary to the westward of Arras to a sector to the north of that battered city. In fact, the entire Canadian Corps, as it retired from *the Somme*, was now to be stationed in that same area, from Arras and north as far as the town of Béthune.



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

The late autumn of that 1916 – after the 1st Battle of the Somme - and the winter of 1916-1917 was a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce* and to re-organize. There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.

**Even having received several re-enforcements, at the end of October the 5th Battalion, CMR, numbered only four-hundred seventy-seven personnel in total, less than fifty percent of full battalion strength (also see below).*

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

There was of course, the constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers. However, it was mostly sickness and dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period.



Of course, after the recent fighting, most units, if not all, were under-strength; even after having been re-enforced again, by the end of the month of December the 5th Battalion CMR numbered just seven-hundred fourteen personnel all told, still some three-hundred short of *establishment strength*.

(continued)

Any newcomer's introduction to the forward area during that winter period may well have given him a false impression of what exactly war was like at *the Front*. While it is true that during the month of January and the first half of February the 5th Battalion CMR, following that routine of trench warfare, was to serve in the front lines, support positions and reserve areas, it was overall to be a very quiet period.

In fact the Battalion War Diary records that during the entire period from October 23 of 1916, after its retirement from *the Somme*, up until February 12, 1917, when it was posted to the rear area for training – a total of one-hundred twelve days – the unit's casualty figures had been just eight *killed in action* and fifty-one *wounded*.

It was during this period that Trooper Rees was to be promoted on two occasions within the sort period of a month: on January 28 he was elevated to the rank of lance corporal and twenty-six days following, on February 23, he was appointed to that of corporal and thus put up his second chevron.

For the final two weeks of February the 5th CMR Battalion was withdrawn to the areas of Mont St-Éloi and then Raimbert for two weeks of specialized training. In March it was then sent to Cauchy-à-la-Tour for some three weeks before it moved to nearby Houdain for further days of specialized exercises.



Among these exercises were to be some novel developments: use of captured enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.



(Right above and right above: *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 – destroyed in 1793 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)

**Not to be confused with the St-Éloi of earlier pages fought over in Belgium.*

On March 23 the unit was sent south by route march to Villers-au-Bois. The 5th Battalion was still to the rear of the forward area however, there ostensibly to rest. However, the War Diarist records that working-parties were in fact the order of most days, and it would also appear that this – exacerbated by the foul weather and the German guns – contributed to make this a most miserable tour *out* of the trenches.



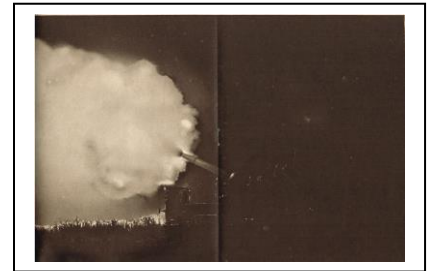
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(Preceding page: *Villers Station Cemetery, Villers-au-Bois, was used primarily by medical facilities in the area during the years 1916-1918. Today within its bounds lie over twelve-hundred Commonwealth dead – the majority Canadian – and also thirty-two former adversaries. – photograph from 2017*)

During the first days of April, Corporal Rees' unit was still behind the lines, at *Woodman Camp*. It was by then becoming noticeable that the Canadian artillery was now ranging onto pre-selected targets and that a preliminary barrage was in its opening stages. Exactly what all these preparations were all about was to become clear on April 5 when the following operational orders were received:

(Excerpts from 5th Battalion War Diary entry for April 5, 1917) *The Canadian Corps, in conjunction with a larger operation by the Third Army on our Right (the 1st Army on our Left) will attack and capture VIMY RIDGE. The 3rd Canadian Division will attack with two Brigades in line and one in reserve...the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade on Right... - although as late as April 7 the War Diarist was still guessing as to the precise date of the upcoming attack.*

As the days passed the artillery barrage grew progressively heavier, on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist describing 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 the night. – from Illustration*)

At ten o'clock in the evening of April 8, Corporal Rees' 5th Battalion, CMR, by this time one-thousand thirty-one strong, began to advance through the mud to its assembly positions. As they moved forward, the troops...*proceeded to Dumps to load up with material & tools, bombs, water, wire, S.A.A. etc. for carrying forward.*

2.30 A.M. *"A" Company entered GOODMAN TUNNEL followed by "D" Company and halted... 4th C.M.R. Bn. in Tunnel ahead.*

4.30 A.M. *"A" and "D" Coy's moved forward in Tunnel again and halted... "B" and "C" Coy's filing into Tunnel.*

5.30 A.M. *ZERO HOUR Intense artillery bombardment – one continuous roar. The ground trembled and there is mingled with the roar of the guns the swishing and screeching of the shell-filled air. 60 guns are covering our advance, forming a "rolling barrage". Smoke and debris thrown up by the bursting shells dive the appearance of a solid wall...*



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

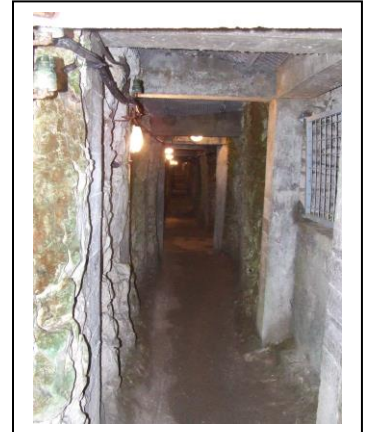
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On that April 9 of 1917 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of *the Somme* battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, 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 to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive – *le Chemin des Dames* – was a disaster.

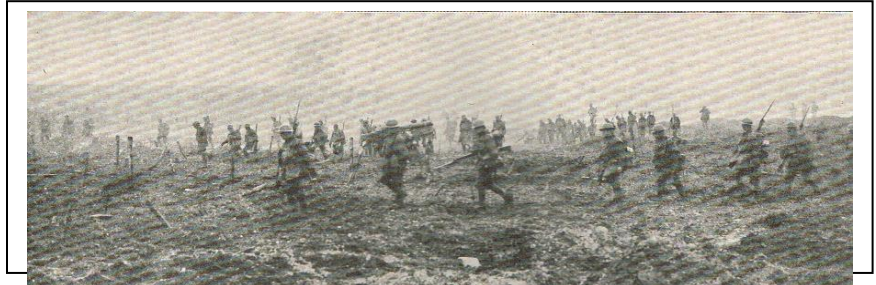
On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants*.

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



(Right below: *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*)

(Extract from 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary, Appendix D): *5th CMR Bn. in Reserve with two Companies in GOODMAN TUNNEL, and two Companies in PYLONES DUGOUTS. H.Q. with Bde. H.Q...*



5.48 a.m. A Coy. 5th C.M.R., detailed to support 1st C.M.R. reported to have deployed clear of the Tunnel and be advancing in rear of the 1st C.M.R...

6.10 a.m. A Coy...bayoneted or captured about 40 Germans who emerged from PRINZ ARNOLF TUNNEL and attempted to shoot our troops in the rear.

7.05 a.m. A Coy...reported to have reached SWISCHEN STELLUNG in support of 1st C.M.R.

9.05 a.m. D. Coy., subsequently followed by B. Coy...ordered to move forward to SWISCHEN STELLUNG in support of our front line troops, and H.Q. and C. Coy...ordered to move forward to head of GOODMAN TUNNEL...

April 10th Noon The 5th C.M.R., less one Coy...were held in readiness to push through VIMY to the line of the railway running through VIMY Station, in the event of their not being held...

The 5th C.M.R. ordered to stand down...

The four Battalions of the Bge. were relieved...during the night April 11/12th

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



April 12th. 12 noon Casualties sustained during the above operations were:- ...5th C.M.R. Battalion 2 Officers 90 O.Rs.

There had been, on and just after April 9 and 10, the opportunity to advance through the shattered enemy defences – the highly-touted breakthrough – but such a follow-up on those days' successes proved logistically impossible. Thus the Germans closed the breach 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.

After *Arras* the situation had slowly reverted again to that of everyday trench warfare. Until the end of June the 5th CMR Battalion when in reserve was withdrawn to Villers-au-Bois; then, when on support and front-line duty, Corporal Rees and his comrades-in-arms were to find themselves in an area designated as *Vimy Defences*. With the advent of the month of July, the unit was withdrawn from the forward line for almost the entire month to prepare for upcoming events.

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 reserves - from that area, it had also ordered operations to take place at the sector of the *Front* running north-south from Béthune 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*)

* * * * *

However, this mostly (successful) Canadian effort was to be undertaken without the services of Corporal Rees*. In fact it was not to be until the beginning of that November of 1917, some four months hence, that he was to again serve with the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles.

A period of leave and then one of sickness were now to intervene.

(continued)

**This may not be precisely true as – as seen further below – his unit was to be somewhat involved during the days that followed a first return. But then Corporal Rees was soon again to have departed.*

The period of leave, granted from August 4 to 14, was the standard Army furlough of ten days (inclusive). It is likely that Corporal Rees was to spend it in the United Kingdom although it is not impossible that it was the French capital city rather than the English one which was to welcome him.



(Right: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

* * * * *

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

On August 15, the day after Corporal Rees' return from furlough...to duty..., a major attack was launched by Canadian 2nd Division troops on the suburbs of Lens and the area just to the north, in the area of a small rise known as *Hill 70*. The 5th CMR's 8th Brigade* was not a part of this offensive, but at the same time this force was moving forward from the rear area to take advantage of any retreat by the Germans.



**It will be remembered that the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles was one of the four Battalions, all of them dis-mounted CMR units, which comprised the 8th Brigade.*

It was on August 18 that the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade took over billets from the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade at Les Brebis, just to the south of the community of Mazingarbe. On the night of August 19-20 the 5th CMR Battalion moved forward into support positions and, on the 21st-22nd, up into the front line.

The 5th CMR Battalion War Diary entry for August 24, 1917, reads partially as follows: *...Our right front and communication trenches were shelled at intervals during the day. The enemy subjected our front line...to a short bombardment at about 2.00 am...*



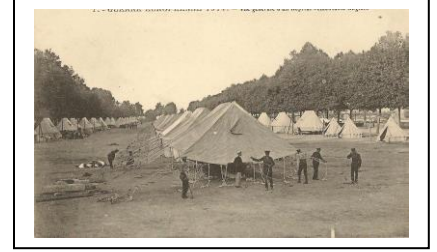
Then on August 27th: *The total casualties for the tour are as follows – Killed 11 other ranks, Died of Wounds 3 other ranks, Wounded 3 officers 25 other ranks*

(Right above: *Canadian troops in the Lens Sector in the summer of 1917 working under shell-fire in the trenches – from Le Miroir*)

By this last date, however, Corporal Rees had been under medical care for an number of days, likely since August 22 when he had been evacuated to the 86th Field Ambulance.

* * * * *

On the day following that above-cited date he had been forwarded to the 58th Casualty Clearing Station, located at Lillers, thirty kilometres to the north-west of Lens where his battalion was fighting*. There he was diagnosed as having incurred a venereal complaint - perhaps a souvenir of his recent furlough.



(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 – from a vintage post-card*

**Other dates are also recorded for his admissions into the FA, the CCs and later, hospital, but they differ by only a day or so and do not greatly affect the substance of the story. The dates documented above are those which seem to be most likely.*

On the day of his admission into the 58th CCS, August 23, Corporal Rees was placed on board the 5th Ambulance Train which was now to transport him to the coastal town of Etaples where he would be admitted into the 51st General Hospital which specialized in problems such as he now was exhibiting.

(Right: *During the Great War the coastal town of Etaples was to become the centre of a large medical complex of some sixteen hospitals and a convalescent depot used by the British and Commonwealth (Empire) forces. The Military Cemetery, several kilometres to the north of the community on the road to Boulogne, is the last resting-place for more than eleven-thousand dead – including some former adversaries – and is the largest British burial-ground in France. – photograph from 2016)*



He was discharged from medical care* on September 19, almost a month after his admission, whereupon he was ordered to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Base Depot**, by that time also at Etaples, where he was assigned to serve with the Base Details.

**He also had fifty cents per diem deducted from his pay for the twenty-four days spent in hospital, often – but not always (particularly not for officers) the policy for venereal cases.*

***By this time the original Canadian General Base Depot near Le Havre had been re-organized and each Canadian Infantry Division (there were to eventually be four of them on the Continent) by the spring of 1917 was to have its own Base Depot. The 5th CMR Battalion was a unit of the 8th Brigade which, in turn, was an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division whose Infantry Base Depot was established at Etaples.*

Corporal Rees was...*Taken on Strength...*by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Base Depot on September 20, the day following his release from hospital, and, perhaps because he apparently now had problems with varicose veins, he was to remain to serve there until the 29th day of October before being dispatched to the newly-operational *Canadian Infantry*

Reinforcement Camp at Calonne-Ricouart, some sixty kilometres directly to the east of Etaples.

Four days later again, on November 2, he left the **CIRC**, having been ordered back to his unit which at the time was busy in the vicinity of a village called **Passchendaele**. Corporal Rees reported back...*to duty*...on November 6 (the War Diarist has suggested November 5) to his battalion which at that particular time was quartered in and about the community of **Wattou (Watou)** on the Franco-belgian border, its personnel on that November 6 being concerned with drill and with having a bath.

* * * * *

We turn the pages back to the late summer of 1917 with Corporal Rees receiving treatment in the 51st General Hospital at Etaples, and we follow the undertakings of the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles.

The Canadian-led campaign of that past summer had apparently been intended to continue into the month of September and even beyond. Despite some promising results such as those seen at **Hill 70**, the British High Command was now about to change the course of events: the affair at **Passchendaele** had not been going well, casualties had been high and there had now been a shortage of reserves. Thus the Canadians would be ordered to prepare to move into Belgium and the fighting in the **Lens-Béthune** Sectors was to come to a premature end.

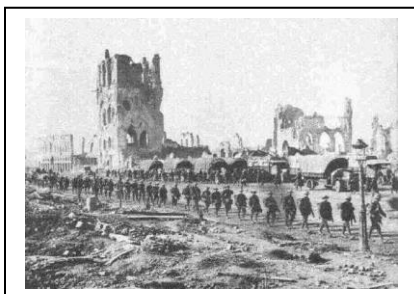
After a month of September, much of it spent in training and during which there was to be little infantry activity, on October 15 the Canadians of the 5th CMR Battalion had been transferred north by train to **St-Sylvestre Cappel** in the area of the French town of **Hazebrouck**.



From there they would be ordered to Belgium and, once more, to the **Ypres Salient**.

(Right above: *The community of Hazebrouck in the period between the wars – from a vintage post-card*)

It was not until the final weeks of that October that the Canadian Corps was to become embroiled in the offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the **Third Battle of Ypres**, the campaign has come to be known to history as **Passchendaele**, taking that name from a that afore-mentioned village on a ridge that had – ostensibly – been one of the British Army’s objectives.



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

From the time that the Canadians were to enter the fray, it had been they who had shouldered a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which had spearheaded the assault, with the 1st

and 2nd 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 Canadian 2nd Division having finally entered the remnants of Passchendaele itself.

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

It had not been until October 22, three weeks before that November 10, that the 5th CMR Battalion had left the relative comfort of their billets in St-Sylvestre-Cappel to march and then take a train to the battered remnants of Ypres. From the station the unit had then continued, once more on foot, to the north-east outskirts of the city and to a new reserve camp at Wieltje. They had likely passed in the steps of the soldiers pictured above, in front of the remnants of the *Cloth Hall*.

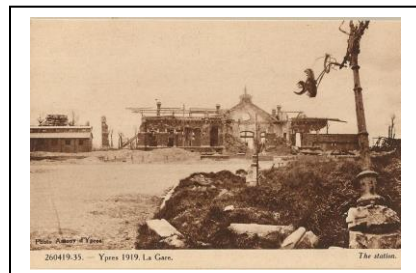


The 5th CMR Battalion had remained at Wieltje – on occasion being shelled and also bombed by enemy aircraft – before moving forward to a reserve area on the 26th. The period from then until the 29th was to be spent firstly...*pumping water out of the trenches to make them habitable...*and then in preparation for an attack to be delivered.

(Right: *The railway station at Ypres (leper) in 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers using a shell-hole and its contents as a wash-basin to perform their ablutions during the period of Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

The attack had been delivered early on the morning of the 30th but even before it had begun, the 5th CMRs had already suffered heavily. By mid-morning it had been reported that ‘A’ Company had failed to reach its objectives and that it had incurred many more casualties during the intervening period. By mid-day its losses had been termed as severe and that of the survivors, subsequently ordered to re-enforce another unit...*only six or eight men reached this objective.*



(Right below: *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*)

On the following day the Battalion had retired to *Camp X*, from there on November 1 retiring even further west to the rear, to *Mills Camp* in the area of Wattou (*Watou*). There the personnel was to be employed erecting tents and undergo training, the compensation for which, it appears, was to be a bath – but not for all - in the town of Poperinghe on November 3.



Those having washed then returned to erecting tents.

It had been, of course, on November 5-6 during this withdrawal to Wattou, and as seen in an earlier paragraph, that Corporal Rees had reported back to his unit.

* * * * *

A week after Corporal Rees' return to his unit, on November 12 the Battalion had been ordered forward to the area of Wieltje, a place well within range of the German guns which targeted "D" Company's field kitchen and destroyed it. "D" Company, however, was not to be afforded the chance to avenge this impertinence as the stay at Wieltje was of short duration. Only some twenty-four hours after its arrival there the Battalion was on its way to the rear area once more, to Brandhoek – half way between Ypres and Poperinghe – where it was then to remain until November 19th.

Passchendaele thus came to a close for the 5th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles and for Corporal Rees, and on that November 19 the unit boarded busses which were to transport it over the Franco-Belgian frontier in a south-westerly direction to the vicinity of the community of Haverskerque from where it marched the twenty-eight kilometres to Flechin, further south again.

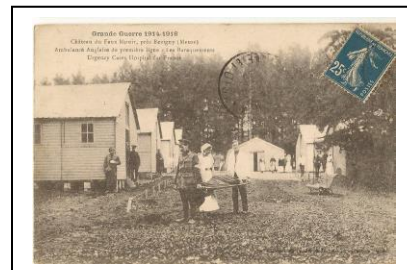
Flechin was to be the 5th CMR's home for the next month, until December 18 when it marched – the War Diarist says...*with difficulty*...because of the icy roads – to the area of Fouquières and Les Brébis in the *Loos Sector* where it moved into the front lines on December 21.



(Right: *The mining community of Loos as it was in 1915, more than two years before the 5th Battalion CMR would be stationed in the area – from Le Miroir*)

* * * * *

Before this return to the forward area, however, Corporal Rees had once again been in need of medical attention: on November 22 he had been sent to the 8th Canadian Field Ambulance to there be diagnosed as having ICT (*Inflammation of the Connective Tissues* – akin to *tendinitis*) of his right hip. There he remained to be treated.



The episode lasted six days after which Corporal Rees was discharged directly back to his unit.

(Right above: *A British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some; the FAs were often responsible for Advanced Dressing Stations and also Rest Stations of which the facility shown above may be one. – from a vintage post-card*)

* * * * *

(continued)

That Christmas of 1917 was spent in the front line, no mention of any festivities having been made of it whatsoever in the Battalion's War Diary. However, on December 28, the day after the one on which the unit had retired, the following entry was made: *This being the first time in the History of the Battalion..., a tour in the front line without one casualty.*

One of the things that the War Diarist appears to have omitted among his daily reports of this period was the Canadian national election. The Canadian Forces personnel serving in the United Kingdom, on the Continent and elsewhere, were to cast their vote during the month of December; in some cases that were reported in other units' war diaries, more than ninety per cent did so. 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.

The winter of 1917-1918 was to be, as had been the prior winters of the Great War, a quiet period. The 5th Battalion CMR went through those successive tours in the front, support and reserve areas; when at *the Front* it appears that a steady pattern of patrolling went ahead on a daily basis, usually involving an officer and some twenty *other ranks*; support often meant serving with working and carrying parties; while reserve was for the most part more work and carrying, a lot of training and, increasingly, sport and competitions of a military nature.

(Right below: *A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917: the use of head-straps was apparently adopted from a practice of the indigenous Canadians – from Le Miroir*)

One raid by the Battalion was carried out during this time, on March 15. Although it was not a particularly major venture, it nonetheless involved several officers and one-hundred fifty-one *other ranks*. Lasting but a few brief hours, it cost the unit five dead and twenty-two wounded which, as far as the Battalion War Diarist was concerned, allowed it to qualify as...*a great success.*



Thus the winter passed. On March 21 it was the first day of spring and the Germans struck.

Perhaps not many people – apparently for a while this included the Battalion War Diarist - realize how close the Germans were to come to victory in that March and April of 1918. On March 21 Corporal Rees and his unit had just withdrawn to *Cellars Camp* at Neuville St-Vaast, away from the forward area. The personnel were thus spending the day cleaning up their new quarters.

Having transferred the divisions no longer necessary on the *Eastern Front* because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans launched a massive attack, designated as Operation '*Michael*', on that day. The main blow was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it had fallen for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops posted there.



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

It was as late as March 25 that...Orders were received from the 3rd Canadian Division that the Battalion would “STAND TO” at 5.00 AM Morning of the 26th March and be prepared to move forward at 30 minutes notice. The order was followed and Sergeant Rees’* unit stood to for some three hours after which time the order was cancelled.

**He had received this further promotion only days before, on March 23.*

On March 28 the Battalion eventually *did* move forward and by the end of the next day, with the entire 3rd Canadian Division, was in the area forward of the village of Roclincourt, the 5th Battalion occupying an elevated area known as *Point du Jour*. There the unit awaited a German attack which finally did not materialize.



(Right: *Point du Jour Military Cemetery, just to the north of the city of Arras, within the bounds of which lie dead from the years 1916 to 1918 – photograph from 2010*)

On March 30, after several days of enemy artillery attention but no infantry activity, Sergeant Rees’ Battalion was relieved and moved back to *Cellars Camp* to rest. Two *other ranks* had been...*killed in action*...during the tour and nine had been *wounded*.

The Battalion was to remain at *Cellars Camp* for a week before being posted once more to front-line positions. The military situation appears to have been stabilizing by this time as the personnel were now able find the time to indulge in a concert on April 4.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)



The German advance south of *the Somme* was to continue for a month before it would peter out just in front of the city of Amiens.

The ultimate failure of the offensive had been the result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.



**A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, was to fall in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in Flanders, the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also had been successful for a while, but was struggling by the end of the month.*

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

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

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

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



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

As for the 5th Battalion, CMR, during these months from March until August, there was the everyday grind of life on the *Western Front*, although the unit was to experience it in several different sectors: in April in the areas of *Hill 70* and *Les Brébis*; in May at *Dieval*, *Witterness* and *Guarbecque*, all in the general area of the northern French town of *Béthune*. In June Sergeant Rees' unit was posted to both *Bomy* and *Flechin* before moving back south to *Izel-lès-Hameau*, to the west of *Arras*, on the 25th.

(Right below: *Canadian troops in the vicinity of Hill 70. It is really not very high, a short time after its capture by the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions – from Le Miroir*)

During these three months, most of the Battalion's time had been spent undergoing training and manoeuvres. These had been performed not only at Brigade and Battalion level but in smaller groupings down to sections. At the end of June, these exercises completed, the unit ceded its place to another Canadian battalion and was now to return...*to duty*...in the forward area of the *Mercatel Sector*.



Nothing of great military import was recorded in that early summer during the tour in the front lines, the War Diary entries being for the most part a litany of the activities of the numerous patrols sent out each day. In the middle of the month of that July the Battalion retired to *Bellacourt* for a collective bath, for several inspections by officers of the upper echelons – presumably *after* the bath – and for sports, a competition having been organized among the four CMR Battalions of the 8th Brigade.

(continued)

Whether Sergeant Rees was to be a participant or otherwise is not recorded, but his unit, the 5th CMR Battalion, captured overall first prize – events included wrestling on horseback, tug-of-war on horseback and tent-pegging.

On July 23, after further training, lectures, instruction with the new tracer ammunition, and a baseball tournament, the 5th Battalion CMR was moved to the “Y” Huts Camp to the west of Arras. The unit was apprised that it was to be prepared to move at twelve hours’ notice. Two days later it was transferred the nearby area of the *Bois de Bray (Bray Wood)*, only a forty-minute march distant, for further training on the Battalion’s Lewis Guns*.

**Light machine-guns requiring only a two-man crew*

(Excerpt from Battalion War Diary entry for July 28, 1918) A message was received from 8th CIB that the 5th CMR Battalion would entrain at AUBIGNY on Tuesday July 30th - destination at present remains unknown.

In fact both the date and the venue of the entrainment were both to be otherwise: on July 30 Sergeant Rees and his unit undertook an eight-hour march to Saulty where orders were then received at ten o’clock in the evening that the unit would board a train at Mondicourt some seven hours later at five-thirty on the following morning, July 31.

Seven and a half hours later the Battalion got off the train at Prozeul(?). The remainder of the transfer was now to be undertaken on foot towards that part of the lines in front of the city of Amiens where the German offensive had been halted in April, almost four months earlier. This sector was now to be the spring-board for the upcoming Allied offensive.

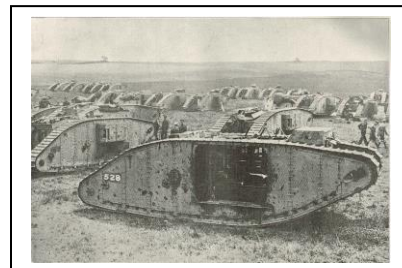
The 5th Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, was not alone in being transferred to the area: a large number of other Canadian units – indeed, almost the entire Canadian Corps – had at that time begun to move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west of Amiens, then south, then east again to finish in front of that city. This movement was to be effected in only a matter of days, much of it on foot, and all of the latter stages during the hours of darkness.

It was intended to surprise the enemy – and it did. It also, in fact, surprised many of the Allied units, whose personnel – if various War Diaries are to be believed – were still unaware, only days prior, of the offensive which was by then imminent.

On August 4, Sergeant Rees and his Battalion encamped in the Bois de Boves and later, on evening of the same day, moved into the area of St-Nicholas. There the 5th Battalion CMR stayed until the night of August 7-8 when it moved into its jumping-off positions: the Allied* attack - well supported by tanks - was to commence on the morrow morn.

**The Allied force at the outset comprised British, Canadian, Australian and New-Zealand units to which also were to be increasingly added more and more French formations (see below).*

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



The next morning, August 8, had been foggy when the barrage descended upon the German defenders. The first assault had been ordered for twenty minutes past four in the morning but it was to be a further two hours before the 5th Battalion, originally in Divisional Reserve, was to be ordered forward.

It would appear from the Appendices in the Battalion War Diary that the 5th Battalion, CMR, was not to be involved in the fighting until the following day. By that time the Germans had been pushed back, some eleven kilometres in places, along the entire front, a feat almost unimaginable at the time after four years of stale-mate*. At seven-thirty on the morning of August 9, the 5th and the 4th Battalions of the CMR were ordered to pass through other units of the 3rd Canadian Division to continue the attack of the preceding day.

**The first day of the Battle of Cambrai in November of 1917 had been a notable exception.*

At 12.00 noon of August 9... Verbal Orders were received from the G.O.C., 8th Cdn. Inf. Bge., that the 5th C.M.R. Bn. on the RIGHT and the 4th C.M.R. Bn. on the LEFT would attack and capture FOLIES and if possible BOUCHOIR, the attack to be made as soon as possible. (Excerpt from Appendix 3 of the 5th Battalion War Diary)

By late afternoon Bouchoir was reported as having been captured and an operation was ongoing in co-operation with French troops and tanks which was to result in the capture of the village of Arvillers later on that same day*.

**The village of Folies is not mentioned again in Appendix 3.*

The 5th Battalion was now placed in Corps Reserve and ordered to consolidate some of the positions that had been won on that day. For a number of reasons the speed of the Allied advance was now slowing but to those who had known the battles of *the Somme, Arras and Passchendaele* where progress, if any, had been measured in a few metres, it all seemed more than a little strange.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers consolidate newly-won positions while others cross a river on an improvised bridge. – from Le Miroir*)

The Battalion War Diarist summed it up in his entry of August 10 when he wrote: *It seems strange, 24 hours ago we captured this ground, tonight we are (in the same place) undressing & going to bed well behind the lines in Corps Reserve.*

The same writer also documented a total of fifty-nine casualties incurred by the 5th Battalion, CMR, up until and including that date.



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

A further push had been planned for September 12 but...*the enemy is apparently bringing up his artillery and is offering a stout resistance. Operational order from Brigade stated that owing to increasing defensive of enemy the attack of the Canadian Corps would probably not take place for two days. The 8th C.I. Bde. Operation Order was cancelled & the Brigade is to remain in its present position...*

The Operation Order was re-instated and again cancelled on two further occasions before the Battalion received the news that the 3rd Canadian Division was to be relieved by the 1st Canadian Division and was to move back to *Le Quesnel Wood* on the 16th.

(Right: *Hillside Cemetery, Le Quesnel, in which lie at least two Newfoundlanders who wore a Canadian uniform** – photograph from 2015)



**Lieutenant Goodyear and Private Pugh*

On one occasion a single company was ordered forward into the trench system but apart from that episode – innocuous as it turned out – Sergeant Rees' Battalion remained out of action during the remainder of this, the 3rd *Battle of the Somme*.

At six in the morning of August 20, after a twenty-four kilometre march, the unit boarded a train for Bouquemaison, some forty miles to the north of Amiens and apparently, at least on this occasion, a nine-hour train-ride away.

After a further march to its billets the 5th Battalion, CMR, and Sergeant Rees were back in the sector which they had left only three weeks previously.

And so would soon be the remainder of the Canadian Corps. Having been withdrawn, their places in the line taken by French troops, the Canadians had retired from the *Amiens Front* by the same itineraries as by which they had arrived. What is more, the same discretion and secrecy was now practiced once again.

(Right above: *French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix, just to the west of Rosières, the French having relieved Canadian troops towards the end of the second week of the battle: Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground.* – photograph from 2017)



By the end of August the Canadian Corps was ready for offensive operations in tandem with British forces astride the axis of the main road leading from Arras to Cambrai.



(continued)

In fact this offensive was to begin on August 26 when British and Canadian troops were to fire the opening rounds of the *Battle of the Scarpe*. By the next day more Canadian battalions would have joined the fray and, two days later again, units of all the Canadian Divisions were to have seen action on this new front.

And once again, it appears that the Germans were not prepared for the appearance of the Canadian Corps.

(Preceding page: *Some of the ground on which fighting took place at the end of August and beginning of September of 1918: The Arras to Cambrai road – looking in the direction of Cambrai – may be perceived just left of centre on the horizon. – photograph from 2015*)

It was in an area just to the north of the Arras-Cambrai Road that the four companies of the 5th Battalion, C.M.R., found itself by two-thirty in the morning of August 25.

(Excerpt from Appendix 9 of the 5th Battalion War Diary for the month of August of 1918) *The 8th C.I.B. were ordered to attack and capture enemy positions from the ARRAS-CAMBRAI Road to the SCARPE River in connection with the 2nd Canadian Division, who were ordered to attack to the right. The 51st Division on the left were ordered to exploit any success south of the Scarpe by pushing patrols out along the north bank with a view to gaining MOUNT PLEASANT.*

Among the tasks allotted to the 5th Battalion was an attack on MONCHY VILLAGE, perhaps better known to Newfoundland History as Monchy-Le-Preux*.

**On April 14, 1917, the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment had been ordered into an attack which was militarily untenable. It had failed and the enemy had organized a counter-attack. The remnant of the Battalion, its commanding officer, and a single soldier of the Essex Regiment – ten men in all – had held off this attack until re-enforcements arrived. All ten had subsequently been decorated.*



Although sources differ somewhat, the Newfoundland unit incurred losses of some four-hundred sixty on that day – killed in action, wounded, missing in action and taken prisoner – a count second only to that on the field at Beaumont-Hamel on July 1, 1916.

(Right above: *Seen from the west, from the British point of view, and also from the Arras-Cambrai Road, this is the re-constructed village of Monchy-le-Preux almost a century after the events of 1917 and 1918. – photograph from 1914*)

At 12.30 a.m., 26-8-18, the 5th CMR Battalion commenced to move forward to Assembly Positions, the Assembly being completed at 2.33 a.m... (Excerpt from Appendix 9)

By twenty-minutes past eight on the morning of that August 26, the first two lines of trenches had been taken and the Battalion had apparently already begun the assault on Monchy-le-Preux which was captured later that same morning.

(continued)

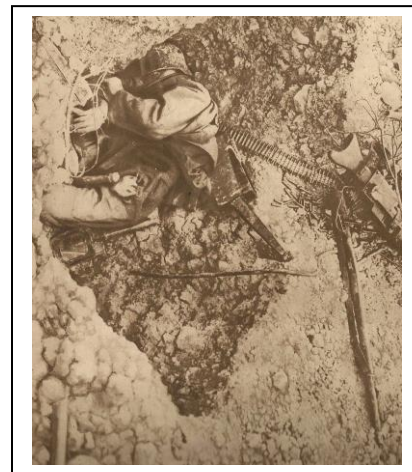
During the twenty-four hours following the taking of the village, the enemy retaliated with a very heavy artillery bombardment. But the objectives of the 5th Battalion had by then been achieved and it was now the turn of the 7th Brigade to pass through the troops of the 8th Brigade and to continue the advance. On the 27th, Sergeant Rees' unit spent its time... *in reorganisation and clearing the battlefield.*

Casualties during this two-day period had amounted to seventeen *killed in action or died of wounds*, one-hundred fifty-seven *wounded*, six *missing in action*, and nine *wounded who had remained on duty*.

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

The fighting was not yet over: on the morrow the Battalion was to once again be called into battle.

But Sergeant Rees was not to lead his Company into battle: on August 26 he had been wounded by a shrapnel 'bullet'*.



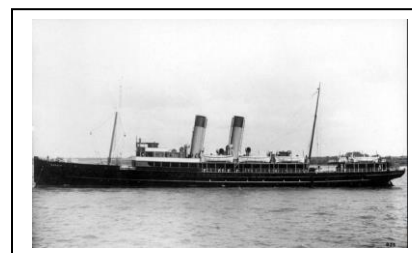
**A shrapnel shell was times to explode over the heads of enemy troops – which explains the shape of the British helmet used during the Great War. Apart from fragments of the casing which were to cause multiple injuries, the shell itself was charged with ball-bearing-like 'bullets'. The explosion must have resembled a large shotgun blast with these 'bullets' rather than pellets.*

'Shrapnel' was named for its inventor, a British artillery officer Lieutenant at the time of his invention) and was first used in the early eighteen-hundreds by the British against the Dutch and later against Napoleon's troops in Spain and at Waterloo.

On that August 26, Sergeant Rees was evacuated from the field, likely via an Advanced Dressing Station, to the 33rd Casualty Clearing Station at Ligny St-Flochel, and was transferred from there on the morrow to the 14th General Hospital in Wimereux where he had been treated two years before.

**At this point he was reported as having incurred a GSW (gun-shot wound) to the head, a report which was to be contradicted after his death (see below).*

He was almost immediately deemed to be *'seriously ill'* by the hospital's medical staff, an opinion which may well have also been applicable to the wound which was later reported – in fact, it is perhaps not impossible that he had been injured in two places.



Surprisingly perhaps, on the second day of September, only a short time later, his name was apparently removed from the *'seriously ill'* list and preparations made for his relocation to hospital in the United Kingdom. This transfer was effected on September 4, when he was placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *St. Denis* and shuttled back across the English Channel to England.

(Preceding page: *The image of a peace-time 'St. Denis' is from the BirtwiistleWiki web-site. Built in 1908 for the Great Eastern Railway the vessel was originally named Munich, a name which changed at the onset of hostilities against Germany. Requisitioned and then converted for use as a hospital ship, she served as such from October of 1914 until October of 1919, accommodating up to two-hundred thirty-one sick and wounded on each passage. Having survived the First World War she was in the port of Amsterdam in 1940 and was captured by the invading Germans and used by them for the remainder of the Second World War which she also survived.*)

There he was disembarked and immediately taken to the 1st London General Hospital in Camberwell, a district in the south-east *Borough of Southwark*.

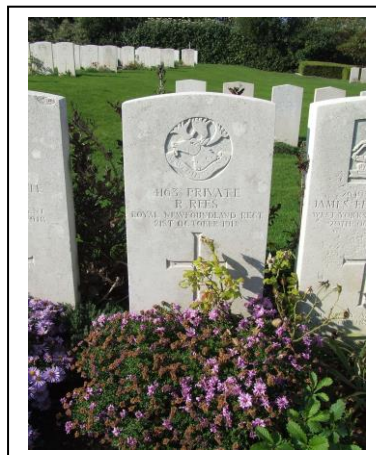
The son of Thomas Rees, farmer-fisherman, and of Elisabeth Rees (née *Waterman** of Fogo) of Lance Cove, Bell Island, to whom had willed his all, he was also brother to Edgar**, Dorman***, Kenneth, George, Blanche-Waterman, Clara, Hector, Malcolm, May (or *Mary*), Warwick and to Hazel.

**The couple had been married in the city of St. John's on October 8 of 1883.*

***Edgar Rees gave his life while serving in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. He was admitted into the 8th Stationary Hospital at Wimereux, on October 17, having incurred gun-shot injuries to both legs and to his right thigh. Both his right leg and thigh were subsequently amputated.*

Private Rees was subsequently reported as having...died of wounds...in the same 8th Stationary Hospital on October 21, 1918.

(Right: *The image is of the headstone of Private Rees to be found in Terlincthun British Cemetery, Wimille. – photograph from 1916 (?)*)



****Dorman Rees served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and survived the conflict.*

Sergeant Rees was reported as having...*died of wounds...in the 1st London General Hospital on September 19 of 1918. At first his death was recorded as having been due to a gun-shot wound to the head; however, the cause of death was soon afterwards amended so as to read...gun-shot wound to the right lung, fracturing spine.*

The following is an undated Medical Case Sheet issued by the 1st London General Hospital at or just after the time of Sergeant Rees' passing:

Admitted 4/9/18 Date of injury 26/8/18

...G.S.W. (Shrap. Bullet) through Rt. chest and fract. of spine. 6 Dorsal vert. ...Condition very bay. Completely paralysed both legs. Overflow incontinence of urine with alkaline urine & pus.

(continued)

Right chest – Pleura full of blood.

Vomiting almost continuous.

X-Rays show shrapnel bullet lying in anterior surface of 6th Dorsal vertebra.

12.9.16. Condition remains same. Vomiting gradually continues going down... P.M. R. lung disorganized haemothorax. Shrapnel bullet lying embedded in body of 6th Dorsal vertebra, spinal cord injured opposite 6th Dorsal.

Died 19/9/18

Eldred Rees had enlisted at the *declared* age of twenty-nine years and four months: date of birth at Lance Cove, Bell Island, Newfoundland, April 6, 1886 (from the *Original Settlers Project* web-site).

Sergeant Eldred Rees was entitled to the British War Medal (on left) and also 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 – February 22, 2023.