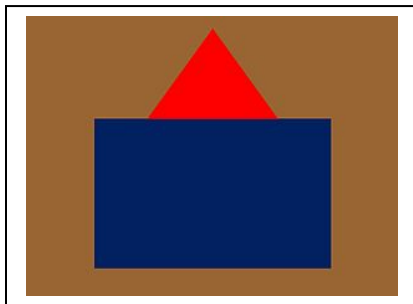




Private William Richards  
Canadian Infantry  
the Canadian  
known last resting-place,  
the Menin Gate, Ypres  
30.



(Number 67117) of the 25<sup>th</sup>  
Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of  
Expeditionary Force, having no  
is commemorated in the stone of  
(today *leper*): Panel reference 26-

(Right: *The image of the  
Battalion is from the*

*shoulder flash of the 25<sup>th</sup>  
Wikipedia web-site.*)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a painter, William Richards has apparently left behind him no details of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, except that he is documented as married and residing, at 32 Margaret Street, in the Cape Breton industrial city of Sydney during the month of November of 1915.

(continued)

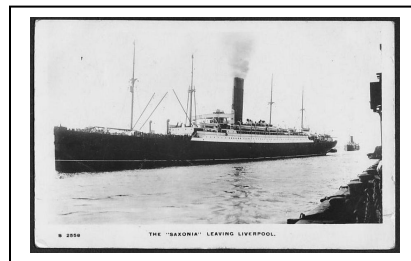
While a single source suggests that William Richards enlisted on November 5, 1914, all his other files – including his first pay records – give the date as having been November 9. He had already presented himself in Halifax for medical examination three days prior, on November 6, the doctor presiding finding him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force.*

On that November 9 he attested in the presence of a Justice of the Peace before the formalities of his enlistment were brought to a conclusion by the commanding officer of the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), Lieutenant Colonel G.A. LeCain, who then declared, on paper, that...*Wm Richards...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

By the end of that month on November, 1914, the strength of Private Richards' 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was eight-hundred ninety-eight men.

It was to be a further six months after William Richards' enlistment that the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked for overseas, the unit having trained at the *Halifax Armouries* during that period – although the exercises had been interrupted by an outbreak of diphtheria.

Private Richards and his unit embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia* in the harbour at Halifax on May 20 of 1915 for passage to the United Kingdom. The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to travel in the company of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (*French Canadian*) from Québec, and also with a contingent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisional Ammunition Park, a total of some two-thousand three hundred military personnel all told.



*Saxonia* sailed on the same May 20, to dock in the English south-coast harbour and naval facility of Plymouth-Devonport at ten minutes past four in the morning of May 29.

(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.*)

The new arrivals apparently soon were on board trains which were to speed them across southern England to the county of Kent. There Private Richards' Battalion proceeded to *East Sandling*, a subsidiary camp of the large and newly-forming Canadian establishment of *Shorncliffe*, on the Dover Straits and in the vicinity of the town and harbour of Folkestone.



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

(continued)

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

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



On September 15, 1915, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion left *Shorncliffe Camp* in the late afternoon and marched to nearby 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\*.

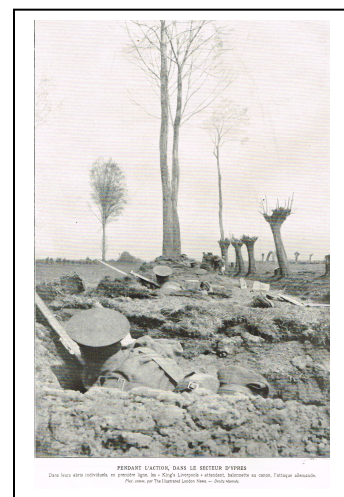


*\*There is a one-hour time difference between the United Kingdom and France.*

(Right above: *A convoy of troops crossing a river by means of a bridge of boats: 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 Battalion marched to meet transport which was to take them into northern France, not far from the frontier with Belgium, and neither far distant from the large centre of Hazebrouk. Three days afterwards, the unit crossed into the *Kingdom of Belgium*.

By September 23, the Nova Scotia Unit was relieving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, *the King's Own*, in trenches close to the Franco-Belgian border in the area of the Kimmel-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*)

(continued)



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 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.*

*(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of the same 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)*

The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion's first two casualties – not fatal - on active service were in fact to be self-inflicted wounds. However, on September 25...*Had one man killed in action. #67563 L/Cpl McLean J.A. was sniping and succeeded in hitting two Germans. He was in the act of taking a third shot when he was hit in the head, almost the whole top being shot off. He lived two hours unconscious...* Excerpt from 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for September 25, 1915.



The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) had incurred its first fatality. More were to come, of course, in the months to follow but, relatively speaking, that autumn and winter period of 1915-1916 was to be a period of calm.

*(Right above: La Laiterie Military Cemetery, within the bounds of which is buried Lance Corporal John Archibald McLean – photograph from 2014)*

The rigours of the everyday pattern of trench warfare continued for the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion until the month of April, 1916. Then it became involved - although not to the same degree as were many other units of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division on whom much of the burden fell - in the episode which was to become known as the *Action – or Battle - of the St-Éloi Craters*.

It had begun on March 27 when the British detonated a series of mines under the German lines and had followed up with an infantry assault. All had not, however, gone as planned: the British attack became bogged down, not least of all because of the problem of crossing the craters caused by its own mines which had then become filled with rain-water. The troops often fought immersed up to their waists.



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

On April 3 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division entered the fray, relieving the by-then exhausted British. Fighting under the same abominable conditions they had as yet no steel helmets and few machine guns; they, like the British, found that the shattered landscape little resembled what they had been told to expect. And they, like the British, floundered and lost their way as the German defences daily grew more resolute and their artillery fire grew ever more in strength.



The fighting lingered on into the fourth week of April – even though the *official* end of the affair is recorded as April 17 - by which time the Canadians alone had lost some fifteen-hundred men and all for nought: the Germans had won back everything that had been lost.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been *standing to*, ready for action on April 7, but was not to move into the forward area until April 12, there to alternatively occupy front lines and support positions, and to relieve some of the troops in the craters.

The Battalion War Diary entry of April 14 reads partially as follows: *Our casualties in No.5 Crater were 3 Killed and 8 Wounded. Shelling still very heavy on craters. Total casualties during tour in front line 2 Officers Shell Shock – Killed 18 O.R. Wounded 42 O.R. Battalion relieved by 24<sup>th</sup> night of 14-15.*

This number of casualties was a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date. Having then retired from the fray, it thereafter played no further role at St-Éloi. It was to be a further seven weeks before Private Richards' Battalion's next infantry action.

Six weeks after the conclusion of *the Action of the St. Eloi Craters*, in early June, the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to be involved in the fighting in the area of *Hooge, Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse*, all in a sector just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. This was to be the *Battle of Mount Sorrel*.



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

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 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division's lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



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

It was onto the newly-arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division\* that the enemy's offensive thrust of June 2 had fallen; however, the situation had then deteriorated seriously enough for other Canadian units, including the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion, to be called into action. Private Richards' unit was to play a role sufficiently important – manning key defensive positions - for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle honour won by the unit during the Great War.

*\*The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division came into being officially at mid-night of December 31, 1915 and January 1, 1916. However, some of its forces did not arrive on the Continent until later, and it was not until March of that 1916 that the Division was able to assume responsibility for the south-east sector of the Ypres Salient.*

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, immediately reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, June 3, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground.



Badly organized, the operation was a horrendous 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: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)

Nine days later, on the night of June 12-13, the Canadian Corps made a second effort to recapture the lost ground. On this occasion the attack was better co-ordinated, had a well-planned artillery program to support it - and was successful. By the morning of June 13 the infantry action was over – although the German artillery was to fight it out for two more days – and both sides for the most part were back where they had been at the beginning of the affair.



(Right above: *Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 – and 1917 when its summit was blown off - 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*)



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

(continued)

By the end of the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*, however, Private Richards had already made his sacrifice.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary entry for June 8 of 1916 reads as follows: *Battalion proceeding to Zillebeeke trenches tonight. Men resting all day. Busses supplied to carry Battalion as far as Lille Gate in Ypres.*



(Right above: *The Rijsselstraat, the road to Lille in Ypres as it approaches the Lille Gate: the image shows the thoroughfare as it was to be in 1919, a year after the Great War and some five years after the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion likely marched down it in 1915 – from a vintage post-card*)

From the Lille Gate, the southern entry to the city of Ypres, to the village of Zillebeke in the surroundings to the south-east is perhaps a distance of three kilometres. Having covered that distance on foot during the night, by the next day the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion was...*holding front line trenches...heavily bombarded day and night...*

There is no record of what happened to Private Richards, and his remains were never identified.

The son of Abraham Richards, labourer, and of Elizabeth Richards of 25, Balsam Street in St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also husband to Jean M.C. Harper\*. Whether the couple had any children is not to be found among Private Richards' papers.

*\*Whether Harper was her maiden name or a second married name is not documented in Private Richards' dossier or in any other source perused. Nor does any other information about the lady appear to be available from other sources.*

Private Richards was reported as having been *killed in action* on June 8, 1916, during the fighting at *Mount Sorrel*.

William Richards had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-eight years: date of birth (*attestation papers*) in St. John's, Newfoundland, February 3, 1886.

Private William Richards 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 26, 2023.