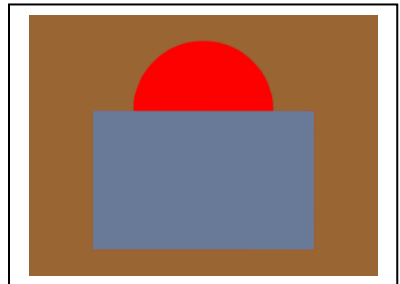




**Private John William Roberts (Regimental Number 107526) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (formerly Regiment), Canadian Mounted Rifles of the Canadian Expeditionary Corps, is buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery: Grave reference VIII A 184 (not 154 as cited by the CWGC).**

***(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, is from the Wikipedia web-site.)***



**(continued)**

His occupations prior to military service variously recorded as having been that of a teamster, sailor and cook, John William Roberts appears to have left little information behind him of his early life in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, where he may have resided with his mother, cited as his next-of-kin, at 887 Water Street. On his attestation papers he reports himself as having served for five years in the British Navy. There appear to be no available records to confirm this\* but there is little reason to doubt it.

All that may be said with any certainty is that at the beginning of the year 1915 he had made his way across the continent to the capital of the Canadian province of British Columbia, Victoria, for that was when and where he would enlist.

*\*It may be that he was referring to the (Newfoundland) Royal Navy Reserve which was to entail a yearly six-week period of training in St. John's on board the training ship, HMS Calypso.*

*\*\*Some of this information was to be amended at the time of his second attestation – see further below.*

In Victoria, on January 15 of 1915, John William Roberts underwent a medical examination, a procedure which would pronounce him as...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. Three weeks later, on February 5, he having been attested and his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace, a Captain Woolard brought the formalities of Trooper Roberts' enlistment to a conclusion when he declared – on paper – that...*John W. Roberts...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

However, seventy-four days later, it would seem that the above attestation was in fact, *not* correct, and Captain Woolard was writing: *No. 10148 Pte. Roberts JW has been discharged from this Corps to date Apr. 20, 1915, under 322 (likely 392) (2) (a) KRTO.*

This section of the King's Regulations – causes for which a soldier could be discharged - states simply...*Having been irregularly enlisted*. There appears to be no further explanation of the circumstances among his documents.

Five weeks after his discharge, on May 26, John William Roberts was to attest and undergo a medical examination for a second time. On this occasion the soon-to-be Commanding Officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, Canadian Mounted Rifles, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Cecil Bott\* was the officer who pronounced himself as *satisfied* with the formalities\*\*.

*\*He was apparently in the company of Captain J.C. Johnson who was to be successor in command of the unit as of November of 1916.*

*\*\*In neither case are any early pay records available to establish an enlistment date.*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles were to train at the *Willows Camp* in Victoria during the period leading up to its departure for *overseas service*. That day came in or about the first week of June, 1915, when the unit took ship from Victoria to Vancouver to then board trains to travel across much of the continent to Montreal. There it was that Trooper Roberts was to take ship.

The ship in question was the *White Star Line* passenger vessel *Megantic*, by this time requisitioned by the government as a troop transport, which was boarded by the contingent from British Columbia on June 12.



(Right: The image of *Megantic*, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the *Old Ship Picture Galleries* web-site.)

Trooper Roberts and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Canadian Mounted Rifles were not to travel on *Megantic* alone: also to embark on the same day for passage to the United Kingdom were two other CMR Regiments, the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup>. It appears not to be recorded if the Regiment's horses were to travel with their riders or on another ship.

*Megantic* sailed later on that day and was to take a week to cross the Atlantic. The vessel then docked on June 19 in the Royal Naval facilities of Plymouth-Devonport on the south coast of England. From there the three CMR Regiments were all transported across southern England to the Kentish coast and to the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone where the Canadians had transformed a small British camp into an major military establishment: *Shorncliffe*.



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

At this time, *Shorncliffe* was being used as a collecting point for the units of the newly-forming 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. In fact it would seem for a while that the Canadian Mounted Rifle Regiments 1, 2 and 3 were to serve with that new formation – the War Diaries of both September and October of 1915 all carry the designation...2<sup>nd</sup> *Canadian Division*.

In the meantime, while at *Shorncliffe*, Trooper Roberts was to be admitted into hospital: on August 10, it was to the military hospital at *Shorncliffe* itself; then on September 7 he was forwarded to *Barnwell Hospital* in the area of the university city of Cambridge. It was a facility that specialized in venereal problems.

Seventeen days after his arrival at *Barnwell*, on September 24, he was discharged back to duty at *Shorncliffe*. By then the complex was almost devoid of soldiery: not only had the three CMR Regiments departed for the Continent just days previously but so also had the entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division.

Apparently just prior to his hospitalization, Trooper Roberts had been *taken on strength* by the Canadian Command Depot\* at *Shorncliffe*; now after his release from medical care he returned there – and to trouble.

\*This was a unit where were posted officers and men who had been considered *superfluous* to their unit's needs. They remained at the Command Depot until their services were once again required, either by their original unit or elsewhere.

Trooper Roberts had by this time already managed to attract the attention of *Shorncliffe Camp* authorities: he had been *absent without leave* for a week just prior to his medical misfortunes, from July 31 until August 6 (inclusive). To that charge were now to be added those of i) Disgraceful conduct ii) Stealing goods belonging to a comrade and iii) Masquerading as a Warrant Officer.

On September 30 he was sentenced to twenty-eight days of detention.

That period of detention having been served, Trooper Roberts was to spend perhaps eleven days at the aforementioned Command Depot, *Shorncliffe*, before being despatched to *active service* on the Continent on November 8. He was there to serve with his former unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR Regiment, it soon to become a battalion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division.

Having crossed the English Channel he was immediately posted to the Canadian Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp*, not far distant from the French industrial city and port of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.

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



There he was *taken on strength* – on paper for the moment – by the Officer Commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles.

\* \* \* \* \*

Even before the personnel and animals of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiments of the Canadian Mounted Rifles had set foot on French soil in that September of 1915, it was becoming progressively evident that the once-mounted troopers were to soon operate as foot soldiers: the final order was to come on December 31 of 1915 as the War Diarist reported...*Infantry instruction now commences for all ranks. General Alderson talks to all officers on subject of change of establishment. This Regiment is now in the 8<sup>th</sup> Can. Infantry Bgde\*. And is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division.*

*\*All of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade's four infantry battalions, as of mid-night of December 31, 1915 and January 1, 1916, were dis-mounted Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Battalions. Prior to that, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, CMR, had been a unit of the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 by January 1 the CMR Regiments had become CMR Battalions.*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, CMR, had sailed from Folkestone on the troop transport *La Marguerite* on the evening of September 22 to Boulogne on the coast opposite, to arrive there at by nine-thirty on the same evening.

(continued)

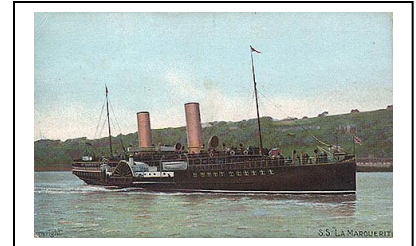
It was then to spend the remainder of the night and a part of the next day at the nearby tented *Number 3 Rest Camp* before it then marched to the railway station at Boulogne.

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



From there the unit took a train to the northern French town of Bailleul which it eventually reached at some twenty minutes before mid-night.

(Right: The image of the elderly – launched in 1894 - paddle-steamer *La Marguerite* is from the 'Liverpool and North Wales Steamship Company' web-site.)



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

Four days later, on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month, the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR...marched...out of Bailleul – horses are rarely mentioned by the War Diarist - to later that day cross the Franco-Belgian frontier near the community of Ploegsteert. There the unit relieved a British battalion, the personnel of which were likely none too happy to have to leave their billets to the Canadians at four o'clock in the morning.



Another march on the following day again, saw the unit reach the area of Neuve Église, a sector where the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR was now to remain posted for the next five days before it was then to be ordered into the trenches – where there was assuredly no room for horses. At about mid-night on the night of October 4-5, the unit became responsible for...a line of trenches...for the first time.

Two days later...*First casualty. Sgt Major J. Marshall shot by sniper through the heart.* (Excerpt from the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR War Diary entry for October 7, 1915)

Thus the now unmounted Mounted Rifles unit began to become acclimatized to the routines, rigours and perils of trench warfare\*.

*\*During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



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

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

The first tour of the trenches was, however, also to be the last for a lengthy period. On October 9 the unit retired to *Aldershot Huts* and there then followed a succession of postings to areas well back from the forward area.

By this time the creation of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division was well in progress, its infantry battalions to be units either already in the United Kingdom or soon to arrive there, or units such as the Mounted Rifles by now serving on the Continent. The Division was to come into being at mid-night of December 31, 1915 – January 1, 1916, thus those units already on the continent were being withdrawn to organize and train, particularly the once-mounted troops who were now to become ordinary infantry.

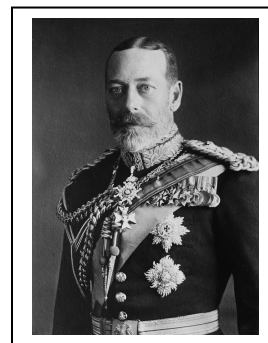
The new Mounted Rifle *battalions* also needed to re-enforce to reach establishment battalion strength, which may well be the reason that Trooper Roberts found himself once again sought after by his former unit and on the way across the Channel on November 8 of 1915. The date of his re-joining the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR was recorded by the Unit's Commanding Officer as having been November 15, exactly the day on which the unit's War Diary records a small detachment of eleven re-enforcements arriving to report *to duty* from *Shorncliffe*.

\* \* \* \* \*

It would be unfair to say that Trooper Roberts and his unit were to seek seclusion for the next number of weeks until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division officially came into service on January 1 of the New Year, 1916. Much of that period was indeed spent to the rear in the area of Bassije, but this was still within range of the enemy guns and the 2<sup>nd</sup> CMR was also to do a certain amount of patrolling and reconnaissance.

Nor was the onset of winter far distant, this normally to be a time of relatively little concerted infantry action, and the festive season, such as the circumstances allowed was also looming. The unit was visited in December by a young politician, at the time in political disgrace due to the still ongoing fiasco at *the Dardanelles (Gallipoli)*: the former First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill.

And of course his Majesty the King was to send his Christmas message to all the soldiers of his Empire.



*(Right above: George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India – the photograph is from Bain News Services via the Wikipedia web-site.)*

(continued)

Trooper Roberts was to fall...*slightly sick*...in the early days of the New Year, to be sent on January 10 to the *Number 1 Convalescent Camp* at Boulogne. There he would remain for eighteen days when – his illness perhaps by then having been diagnosed as something a little more serious – he was to be forwarded to the 11<sup>th</sup> General Hospital also at Boulogne. More serious or not, the diagnosis of his complaint is recorded only as NYD (*Not Yet Determined*).

A week in hospital was now followed on February 5 by a posting to Base Details at the Canadian Base Depot, Le Havre . It was to be almost immediately, as of this moment, that things were to go very wrong for this young man.

It began two days later when he was reported as...*Illegally absent from 7/2/16*.

Two months later, on April 7, Trooper Roberts was reported as having been...SOS (Struck Off Strength) *by Bn 6/3/26, having been declared by Court of Enquiry which assembled at Boulogne 21/3/16 to have illegally absented himself from Boulogne 6/3/16 & and that he so def. (deficient?) in clothing...to value of £ 5-8-6<sup>1/4</sup>...*

It was to get worse. The above report was apparently delivered while he was still absent as suggested by a further document, this one dated 7/9/16: *In confinement awaiting trial 26/6/16 to 15/7/ 16. Tried by FGCM (Field General Court Martial) at Boulogne for “When on active service deserting his Majesty’s service absent from Feb 1916 to 2 June 1916” – Found guilty and sentenced to suffer death by being shot. Sentence confirmed by Gen’l D. Haig Com-in-Chief 26/7/16*

Trooper Roberts was shot as a deserter at Le Portel at 4.36 a.m. on the morning of July 30, 1916.

Details of Trooper Roberts’ family are sparse. His mother, Mrs. M. (also found as Mrs. A.) Roberts, on his first papers cited as living at 887, Water Street, St. John’s, Newfoundland, was only months later declared to be residing at 837 (or 884), Kepper Street in Vancouver East, British Columbia. By 1921-1922 she was reported as having died.

Trooper Roberts had allocated a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay as of July 1, 1915, and up until May 1, 1916, (despite his desertion), to a Mrs. F. Hicks of 1605, Cotton Drive, District 2, Vancouver. No further details appear among his papers.

There appear to be no records of his father in available documents, nor information a propos any siblings.

Having been shot as a deserter, Trooper Roberts was apparently to forfeit his medals. Yet a post-War report cites his uncle, Kenneth Monks of King’s Cove, Newfoundland, as having received the aforesaid decorations.

John William Roberts had enlisted at the *apparent* age of either twenty-one years and six months, twenty-two years and sixty days or twenty-two years and eight months: date of birth in St. John’s, Newfoundland, August 5, 1893 or 1895 (all dates from his personal papers).

(continued)

Trooper Roberts was entitled (or was *not* entitled) to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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 23, 2023.