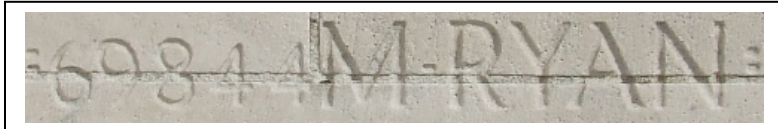


Private Michael Ryan (Number 69844) of the 26th Battalion (New Brunswick), Canada



dian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on *Vimy Ridge*.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-patch of the 26th Battalion (New Brunswick) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a labourer, Michael Ryan appears to have left behind him no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of New Brunswick. All that may be said with any

certainty is that he was present in the city of Saint John during the month of November, 1914, for that was where and when he enlisted.

It is his first pay records which document that it was on November 6 of 1914 that he presented himself for enlistment in Saint John – and was first remunerated for his services to ‘B’ Company of the 26th Overseas Battalion (*New Brunswick*) by which he was *taken on strength* on the same day. A further five days were to pass before Private Ryan would undergo a medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force* – and then attestation.

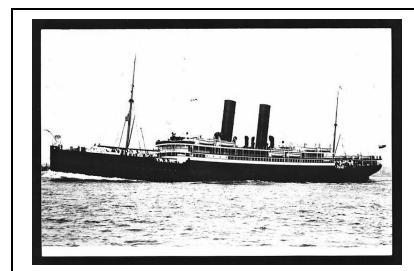
The final bureaucratic act of that busy November 11 came about when a Major McKenzie, on behalf of Lieutenant Colonel McAvery, commanding officer of the 26th Battalion, declared – on paper – that...*Michael Ryan...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Thus came to a close the formalities of Private Ryan’s enlistment.

The 26th Battalion had been authorized only on November 7, 1914, in fact the day after Private Ryan’s enlistment. It had begun training immediately in St. John – at the Barrack Green Armouries - and continued to do so – with a week off during the Christmas period – until the time arrived for its embarkation for passage overseas. The ship which Private Ryan and his Battalion were to board was the requisitioned *Anchor Line* passenger vessel and now troop transport, *Caledonia*.

(Right below: *The photograph of the Anchor Line vessel Caledonia – to be torpedoed and sunk in December of 1916 - is from the Old Ship Photo Galleries web-site.*)

A number of sources cite June 15 of 1915 as the date of Private Ryan’s embarkation but this was apparently not so: the ship is documented as having sailed from Montreal on June 9 with “A” Squadron of the 7th Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles and the 2nd Divisional Remount Depot on board. Her next stop was St. John, New Brunswick, on June 13, where she welcomed not only Private Ryan’s 26th Battalion, but also Section 1 and the Headquarters Company of the 2nd Divisional Ammunition Column, plus a part of the 2nd Divisional Cyclists Company.



Caledonia sailed from St. John on the same June 13 to next put into Halifax on the 15th for the 1st Draft of the 40th Battalion and the No. 2 Heavy Battery of the Canadian Garrison Artillery. She then immediately set out to cross the Atlantic to drop anchor in the English south-coast naval harbour of Portsmouth-Devonport nine days later again, on June 24.

From there it was a train ride to the coastal area of the county of Kent – in the vicinity of the Channel ports of Dover and Folkestone – where the Canadians were busy establishing *Shorncliffe*, a large military complex.

(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military*



Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016)

The 26th Battalion was encamped at *East Sandling*, one of the subsidiary camps at *Shorncliffe*, just down the coast from Folkestone.

It was to be a relatively short wait, a period of about thirteen weeks, for Private Ryan and his comrades-in-arms before they were called to *active service* on the Continent.

On and about September 15 the 2nd Canadian Division took ship to France, the 26th Battalion making the crossing as one of the components of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Private Ryan and his unit - following an inspection by the King on September 2 - sailed on that September 15 from Folkestone to the French port-town of Boulogne* on the coast opposite, some two hours' sailing-time away.

(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*)

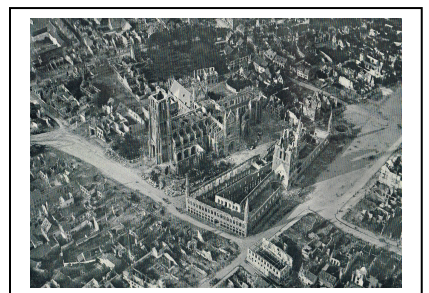
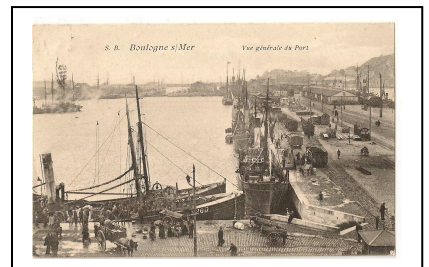
**If Private Ryan by this time were serving with either the machine-gun section or with the Battalion Transport, he would have been one of the few to travel the long way round, via Southampton and Le Havre, to join up with the parent unit at Boulogne the next day.*

On the afternoon of the next day the Battalion boarded a train which, after some six hours, was to find its way some fifty kilometres eastward to the community of Wizernes. The War Diary then recounts that the men were obliged to march... *all night to Bivouac about three miles from Arque* (Excerpt from the 26th Battalion War Diary entry of September 16, 1915). By the evening of the 17th the unit had marched to the larger centre of Hazebrouck and, a week later again, it finally reached permanent billets near Scherpenberg, a small rise – there are no *big* ones - in Belgian West Flanders.

Thus the 26th Battalion arrived in Belgium, to the south of the already-shattered medieval city of Ypres, a sector which it would come to know well as it was to remain there for the best part of a year. It was there that Private Ryan was to become familiar with life in the trenches*.

(continued)

(Previous page: *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 to be little left standing. – from Illustration)

**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 1916, a year later, having by that time been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

For some six months the 2nd Canadian Division led a relatively quiet existence. Then, from March 27 up until and including April 17, 1916 – these the *official* dates - the Division – and thus the 26th Battalion – was to be involved in the *Action of the St. Eloi Craters*. The craters were formed after, on that March 27, the British had detonated a series of mines - underground galleries filled with explosives. The explosions were then immediately followed with an assault by British infantry units.

The Canadians were to take over from the British to occupy the *presumed* newly-won territory; however, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the just-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, plus a resolute German defence, greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6.

(Right above: The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration)

This would be the first major encounter with the enemy that the Canadian 2nd Division was to experience and it likely came as a shock to the new-comers. After some three weeks of fighting in mud and water, at first the British – and then the Canadians who relieved them – were held in check by the German defenders...and they incurred a heavy casualty list.

It appears from the Battalion War Diary, however, that the 26th Battalion itself had been only very *marginally* involved. During the period of the Canadian action, the unit was... *standing by*, was... *in camp*, or for five days in a row... *Battalion in trenches, Large working parties working on trenches. Weather fine.* Apart from the casualties incurred due to his artillery, the Battalion appears to have had no contact with the enemy.

Then from June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the areas of *Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts, Maple Copse, Hooge* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had, it would seem, 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 exploited.

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

The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing an impromptu counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground of June 2.

Badly organized, this operation was to prove 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: *Railway Dugouts Burial Ground (Transport Farm) today contains twenty-four hundred fifty-nine burials and commemorations. – photograph from 2014*)

Then for ten more days there was to be some desperate fighting, at first involving mainly units of the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division*, but soon the critical situation drew in troops from other Canadian formations.

**Officially coming into service at midnight of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of 1916, the 3rd Canadian Division had trained for a period in the Ploegsteert Sector before, in March and April of 1916, becoming responsible for a south-eastern area of the Ypres Salient.*

The 26th Battalion was several times engaged in relieving other battalions during the course of the encounter and it was heavily shelled on occasion. However, it had not been in the forward area during much of the infantry activity and had been withdrawn altogether by the day of the final Canadian counter-attack.

By the time that the 26th Battalion moved up to the front again on June 14, the action at *Mount Sorrel* and its vicinity was all but over. During the preceding night of June 12-13 the Canadians had once again attacked and, thanks to better organization and a good artillery barrage, had taken back almost all of the lost ground. Both sides were now back much where they had been just eleven days earlier.



(Right above: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014*)

(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*)



(Right below: *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)

Thus, after having played its roll at *Mount Sorrel*, the 26th Battalion was relieved and withdrew to *Camp “D”* on June 20.

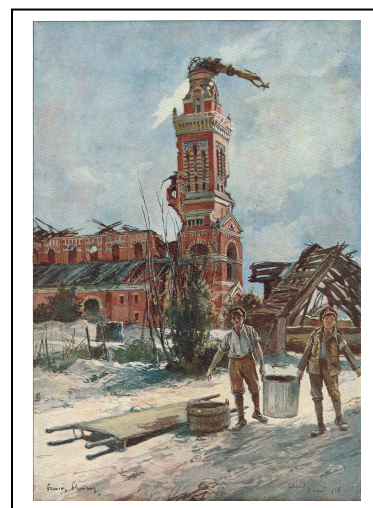
The second half of that following month of July was spent at first in *Alberta Camp* and then further back again, at Brigade Reserve in the *Vierstraat Sector*. To compensate for this likely monotonous period, the Battalion was then posted back into the forward trenches for twenty-two of the first twenty-four days of August.



Having retired again to *Alberta Camp* near Reninghelst on August 25, the 26th Battalion prepared to leave Belgium. The Regimental War Diarist noted in his entry of that day: *All ranks in the best of spirits anticipating the move and eager to effect all details in the number of days training, SOMME OPERATIONS.*

The training area for the 26th Battalion was to be at Tilques, back over the border in northern France and in the vicinity of the larger centre of St-Omer. It required three successive days of marching for the unit to reach its billets at Éperlecques by August 28 before Private Ryan’s unit then commenced training on the morrow. One of the first items on the agenda of December 29 was the replacement of the Canadian-made Ross rifles by its British-made counterpart, the short Lee-Enfield Mark III.

A week later the Battalion marched to the railway-station in Arcques to entrain for the journey south to Conteville. A day spent resting in billets was followed by five more on foot *not* resting, by a march which terminated on September 11 at the *Brickfields (la Briqueterie)*, a large military camp in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.



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

(continued)

The *1st Battle of the Somme* had by that September been ongoing for some two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the 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 that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.

As the Battle had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



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

The 26th Battalion had arrived in the area four days prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette – other units had reported there on only the day before – thus those interim days were spent in preparation. For the attack of September 15, the 26th Battalion was in reserve at the outset and, as such, did not move forward until five o'clock in the afternoon, twelve hours after the initial assault, at which time it re-enforced the efforts of the 22nd and 24th Battalions.



On the following day, the 26th Battalion, according to its War Diary, was moved to the relative safety of a succession of shell holes, apparently staying there all day and... *where the most intense shelling was endured by the battalion throughout this entire day.*



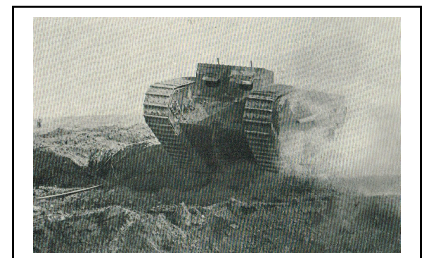
(Right above: *Wounded troops being evacuated in hand-carts from the forward area during the 1st Battle of the Somme – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

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

(Right: *The village of Courcellette, a main objective of the attack of September 15 - just over a century after the events of the 1st Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)



On the 17th the unit was moved once more and took up positions in a sunken road, to once again remain there all day. The only exception was 'B' Company – perhaps still Private Ryan's Company - which assisted in an attack delivered by the 24th Battalion before it *also* moved there. The attack in question... *met with considerable opposition and rifle and machine gun fire was very heavy.*



(Right above: *An early tank of which fifty went into battle for the first time during the British-led offensive of September 15, 1916 – from Illustration*)

But there was more to follow, particularly on September 28 when the Battalion had been ordered forward once again, on this occasion to play a role in *the Battle of Thiepval Ridge*, and more specifically on the right flank, in the area of *Regina Trench*.

Excerpt from 26th Battalion War Diary entry of September 28, 1918: *At 5. A.M. Bn received orders to move immediately and seize and hold Hill 130. The hill was about 1500 yds from our front lines and other side of Regina trench which trench was strongly held by Germans... The Bn had only gone some 600 yds when mist lifted exposing the different Companies to view.*

Enemy immediately opened up with 3 machine guns inflicting some 40 casualties instantly and causing our men to lie down in what cover they could get in...

Two further attacks by Private Ryan's 26th Battalion on that day both failed in a like manner, the German machine-guns inflicting a fearful toll: a further one-hundred eighty-two casualties all told.

(Right: *Regina Trench Cemetery – Regina Trench was adjacent to Kenora Trench, another daunting German strong-point – and some of the ground on which the Canadians fought during that autumn of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)



The son of Edward Ryan, fisherman, and of Winnifred Ryan (née *Skean*) – to whom as of June 1, 1915, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay – of Colliers in the District of Harbour Main, he was also brother to at Edward, Anastasia, to Patrick, Bridget, Margaret, George, Catherine, to Mary and to Denis.

Private Ryan was reported as having been *killed in action* during an...*attack on Regina Trench, Courcellette...* on September 28, 1916.

Michael Ryan had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-three years and one month: date of birth – from attestation papers - at Colliers, Newfoundland, October 12, 1891. However, the Parish of Saint Anne, Conception Harbour, has documented his birth date as having been November 14, 1888.

(continued)

Private Michael Ryan was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 26, 2023.