



Private Alfred (found as *Alford* in some sources) John Shave (Number 478557) of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Canadian 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 cap badge of the Royal Canadian Regiment is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

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His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner, Alfred John Shave may have been the young man who crossed from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia on the SS Kyle on August 26 of 1915. He was on his way to the industrial city of Sydney where he had previously already spent two years of his life as a labourer. However, although the information on the passenger list suits what is otherwise known about him, there is perhaps not enough of it to be absolutely certain.

His personal dossier shows that Alfred Shave presented himself for enlistment, for a first medical examination – which found him...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force* - and for attestation in Sydney on September 21, 1915. Four days later, on September 21, the officer commanding the Regimental Depot of the Royal Canadian Regiment brought the formalities of his enlistment to a conclusion – thus likely in Halifax - when he declared – on paper – that...*Alfred Shave...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

However, even if *not* before, at least as late as September 27, Private Shave was in Halifax, undergoing a second medical examination on that day.*

**In fact a single paper suggests that he was reported to Halifax on September 17 – not impossible.*

There must now have been some logistical and bureaucratic complications in delivering Private Shave to the United Kingdom. By the time of his enlistment, the parent company had, in the month of August, already traversed the Atlantic on board His Majesty's Transport *Caledonia*. There were apparently three re-enforcements drafts to follow, but not one of them was to sail from Canada until the following year, 1916*.

**One paper shows him to be a soldier of the 2nd Draft - impossible as this was a contingent which is not recorded as departing Canada until October of 1916.*

Yet before the end of 1915, Private Shave was already in England; on November 25, he was attached to the 11th Reserve Battalion at the large Canadian military complex of *Shorncliffe*, located in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone on the Dover Straits in the county of Kent.

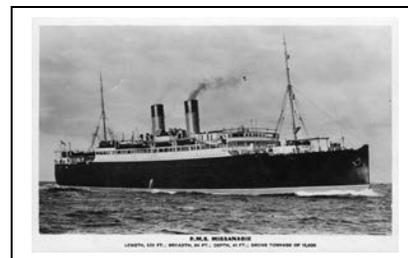
Logically, he must have sailed in mid-November to be at *Shorncliffe* by the 25th – but not too early: there are no records of him wandering around England at this time. And his pay records with the Royal Canadian Regiment in Canada appear to have been documented up until the end of November.

(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*)



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One of the few possible answers is that Private Shave left Halifax for Montreal and sailed on November 13 from there on board HMT Missanabie in the company of – or temporarily attached to – some other unit. However he is not on listed on the nominal rolls of the three main contingents on board Missanabie – although it is possible that he was one of the miscellaneous small detachments that at times also travelled.



HMT Missanabie arrived in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport on November 22, 1915.

(Right above: The photograph of His Majesty’s Transport Missanabie is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

Private Shave’s trans-Atlantic passage remains a mystery.

The next report of Private Shave in England was recorded not long after his arrival towards the end of December, when he overstayed his leave and was ordered to forfeit a day’s pay. Just over two months later he was on his way to active service on the Continent.

It was on March 8 of 1916 that he was transferred on paper from the 11th Reserve Battalion back to his initial unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment, and then transferred by ship to the Continent.



While it appears not to have been documented, it is likely that his draft travelled through the sea-side town of Folkestone and the French coastal community of Boulogne from where he was despatched north-eastwards towards the Franco-Belgian frontier.

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

There on March 9 he reported to duty to the RCR in the field, at a time when the unit had been withdrawn in reserve in the area of Lochre and Mont des Cats. It was apparently a quiet time, the Battalion War Diarist noting merely that...Ground still covered with snow.

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The Royal Canadian Regiment, although having been the senior Regiment in the Canadian Army at the outbreak of the Great War, had not been among the first units to be despatched overseas. In fact, it had initially been sent for a year to act as garrison of the British possession of Bermuda.

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After it had been returned home in the summer of 1915 on HMT *Caledonia* and then ordered overseas only days later, in that August on the same *Caledonia*, it had been attached to the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Canadian Division. The RCR* had then been transferred to the Continent on November 1 of 1915, and immediately sent to the Franco-Belgian frontier area, thence to the southern area of Belgium to train with the by-then veteran Canadian 1st Division.

**A regiment was a military formation which could comprise any number of battalions. In peace-time the count was usually fewer than in war-time: for example, prior to the Great War, the Essex Regiment numbered as many as eight battalions; during the conflict the Regiment was to provide thirty infantry battalions. The two Canadian regiments to fight in the War, the RCR and the PPCLI (Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry) each had one single fighting battalion, often referred to by the regimental title.*

The 3rd Canadian Division had only come into being as of the mid-night of December 31, 1915, and January 1 of 1916. Unlike the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions, it had not been organized in England but was composed, in an almost ad hoc manner, of battalions already on the Continent, but of also some that would arrive there some two months later; as for artillery, until July of 1916 it would have to rely on Royal Artillery formations which had recently been serving with the Lahore Division of the Indian Army.

While there was little, if any, concerted infantry action on that part of the front which had become the responsibility of the Canadian 3rd Division, the routines of the day kept the units busy. At the forward area there was construction, consolidation and improvement of trenches and defensive positions, and the wiring of *them* and of No-Man's-Land.

There was also sentry duty and patrolling, interspersed now and again by a raid – an activity practised ever-increasingly by both sides. There was also that steady trickle of casualties, caused for the most part by enemy artillery action and by his snipers.

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On March 20, 1916, only eleven days after Private Shave's arrival, he and the 3rd Canadian Division had been ordered into the *Ypres Salient*. During the winter months of 1916, posted to the sector behind the 1st Canadian Division, the newcomers had settled into the routines of trench warfare: now, during the spring, they were about to learn about the multiple perils of it as well*.

**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, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*



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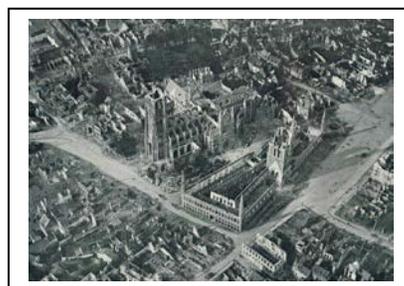
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

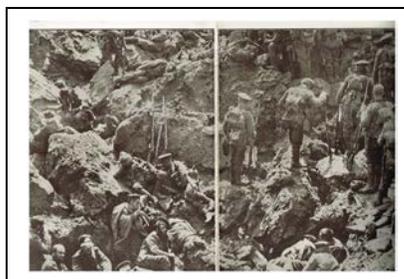
In late March and April there was to be a more serious confrontation further down the front towards the border. It involved, at first, British forces and then those of the Canadian 2nd Division – and of course, the German Army. The RCR, nearer to Ypres, was to only hear the rumble of the guns.

(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 to be little left standing. – from Illustration)

That *Battle of 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, filling them with explosives. These mines they detonated on that March 27, the infantry following up with an assault.



After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th, when the battle was called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had taken some fifteen-hundred casualties.



(Right: Advancing in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine – from Illustration)

But it was to be a further six weeks before the Canadian 3rd Division and with it the Royal Canadian Regiment were to experience their own baptism of fire.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Maple Copse, Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. 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 exploited.



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

(Right below: *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 British 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 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.



Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked, on this occasion better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.



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

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

The Royal Canadian Regiment had been serving in the front line in the area of the first attack and had been driven back with heavy casualties. The Germans had made repeated attacks on that day, interspersed with heavy artillery bombardments. The morning of the next day had seen a further attempt by the Germans to advance against the positions of the neighbouring battalion, the PPCLI, in which they succeeded. Then began those disorganized and subsequently futile Canadian counter-attacks.



By comparison with the first two days of the encounter, June 4 and 5 were relatively quiet. On the evening of the latter day the RCR had been relieved and arrived at 'B' Camp at five in the morning. The unit was to take no further part in the action. It had suffered the afore-mentioned one-hundred forty-five casualties among the *other ranks* – plus fourteen *missing*, all of whom eventually returned to duty – and six officers.



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(Preceding page: A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against all except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014)

On June 7 the RCR Battalion had retired even further to the west, to Steenvoorde, across the border and into France, there to re-organize and to re-enforce. It was to be a further fourteen days before the unit was ordered forward again, moving forward in busses to Ypres before being guided by the Irish Guards into the trenches which were now a Canadian responsibility.



(Above right: London busses, requisitioned for the war, transporting troops in Belgium, some apparently preferring to walk – from Illustration)

Life in the *Ypres Salient* was now to follow much the same pattern as before the confrontation at Mount Sorrel and in general the summer of 1916 was relatively quiet in Belgium – although less so during the third week of August when several raids and some aggressive patrolling by both sides was undertaken. Then, as of August 19, Private Shave's Battalion was withdrawn to the rear area before being ordered to Cassel on August 24 where it remained until September 6.

That period was for the most part spent in training; when it rained too heavily, lectures; the inevitable parades and inspections; practising attacks in platoon, company and battalion strength; co-operation with aircraft; musketry; and bombing - to all of which was added a number of route marches: this was the lot of the Private Shave's RCR Battalion.

On September 7 Private Shave and his comrades-in-arms paraded at four in the morning, then marched to the railway station at Esquelbecq for an eleven-hour train-ride southwards, to Conteville, before a further march to billets in Cramont. This community was well to the west of the fighting and the unit trained there for two days before marching again – toward the sound of the guns.

By 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, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – all in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.

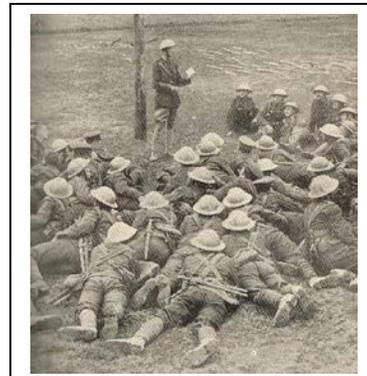
On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the *1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment* which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.



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

As the battle had progressed, other 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 Courcelette.



(Right above: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)

The RCR had arrived in the area of the provincial town of Albert in the late evening of September 13 and on the 15th was ordered to move forward in order to attack on the 16th. By four o'clock in the morning of the 17th when it retired, the Royal Canadian Regiment Battalion had incurred some two-hundred eighty casualties.



(Right: *The village of Courcelette, 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*)

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



Another major action was to follow: the attack on the *Regina Trench* system of October 8-9 was not a success, but rather an expensive failure; the German positions would not be definitively taken until November 11.



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

On the day of the attack by the RCR and 49th Battalions things had apparently at first gone well; later the tide turned...Excerpts from the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary for October 8, 1916, pertaining to the Royal Canadian Regiment: *The two right hand companies went straight as a die to their objective and reached REGINA TRENCH with not too heavy losses, but the third Company was subjected to very heavy machine gun fire and suffered heavily...*

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...The two companies in REGINA TRENCH proceeded to “mop up” the dugouts... Their bombers bombed down towards the left... They secured a good many prisoners and were forming them up to march out when the Germans launched their attack, preceded by a deluge of rifle grenades, bombs and machine gun fire, and on the Eastern end a hurricane of whiz bangs. The R.C.R. hung on desperately but were eventually forced out of the trench and a few managed to crawl across to the jumping off trench...

The casualty total as documented in the War Diary by the evening of October 9 was as follows: seven *killed in action*; seventy-four *wounded*; two-hundred twelve *missing in action*...It is expected that most of those reported missing will be located through slips from Casualty Clearing Stations as having passed through dressing stations of other Regiments on our flanks.

There appears to be no future entry to confirm the veracity of the War Diarist’s optimism...and at least one *missing in action* contradicts it.

The son of George Alfred Shave, fisherman, and of Melinda* Shave (née Kurley, deceased from bronchitis March 14, 1902) – to whom he had willed his all – of Harbour Buffett, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Margaret and to Bella.

***Other sources cite her name as Melentia, but the evidence from parish records, from a historical web-site (*Descendants of Henry Upshall...*), from Vital Statistics, and from business directories seems to corroborate Melinda as the correct name.**

Private Shave was reported as missing in action on October 8, 1916, his file amended so as to read killed in action on May 23, 1917. No further details appear to have been recorded.

Alfred John Shave had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty years and eight months: date of birth – from attestation papers - in Harbour Buffett, Newfoundland, December 5, 1895.

Private Alfred John Shave was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

