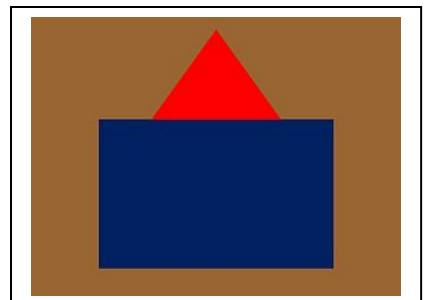




Private Alonzo Slaney, Number 67877, of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Reninghelst New Military Cemetery: Grave reference I.J.1.

(Right: *The image of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

(continued)



His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *fisherman*, Alonzo Slaney appears to have no information behind him of his early years in the community of St. Lawrence in the Dominion of Newfoundland, or of his subsequent movement to the capital city of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. All that may be said with any certainty is that he was present in Halifax late in the year 1914, for that was where and when he enlisted.

It was on November 23, according to his first pay records, that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Slaney for his services to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*), a unit newly-authorized for overseas service*, by which he had immediately been *taken on strength* on that same day – but the venue of the proceedings of this first day, while likely having been Halifax, is not noted.

**Canada already possessed a number of Canadian Militia regiments, but these, by law, were unable to operate outside the borders of the country. Thus upon the outbreak of the Great War, new overseas battalions – for whom the militia regiments could recruit, and from which many soldiers transferred – were formed, more than two-hundred fifty by the end of the conflict.*

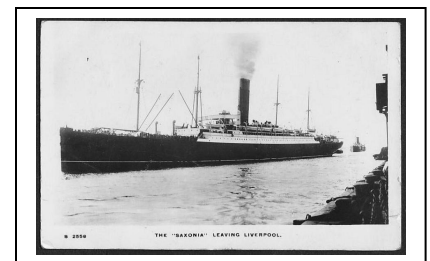
Two days afterwards it *is* confirmed by his personal papers that Private Slaney was in the provincial capital city of Halifax, there for further formalities and processing. Having thereupon undergone attestation on November 25, his oath witnessed by a Captain J.W. Logan, he then presented himself on the morrow to undergo a medical examination, a procedure which found him to be...*fit for the Canadian Over Seas Expeditionary Force.*

The formalities of enlistment were then brought to a conclusion almost ten weeks later again, on January 2, 1915, by the Officer Commanding the 25th Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel G.A. LeCain, when he declared – on paper - that...*Alonzo Slaney...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

It was to be yet a further five months after his enlistment that Private Slaney and his 25th Battalion embarked for overseas, the unit having trained at the Halifax Armouries and on the nearby Common, during that period – although the exercises were to be interrupted by an outbreak of diphtheria. In the case of ‘D’ Company to which Private Slaney had been attached – and also of ‘B’ and ‘C’ Companies – much of that time would also be spent under canvas, there being room for only ‘A’ Company to billet in the Armoury itself*.

**Although wooden huts were being constructed at the time some personnel were never to inhabit them.*

Private Slaney 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 25th Battalion was to travel in the company of the 22nd Battalion from Québec, and also with a contingent of the 2nd Division Ammunition Park, for a total of some two-thousand three hundred military personnel all told.



(continued)

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.

(Preceding page: *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.*)

(Right: *The harbour of Plymouth-Devonport as it was almost a century after the Great War, and a lot less busy than at that time - photograph from 2013*)



The new arrivals apparently soon were on board trains which then sped them across southern England to the county of Kent.

Once there, Private Slaney's Battalion proceeded to the large and newly-forming Canadian military establishment of *Shorncliffe* on the Dover Straits and in the vicinity of the sea-side 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*)

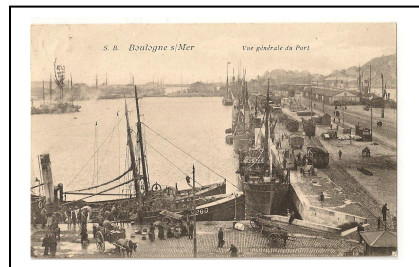


The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) was a component of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division. The 1st Canadian Division had been serving on the Continent since February of that same 1915, having been deployed in northern France and subsequently in the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

But before he was to depart from *East Sandling*, a subsidiary camp of the *Shorncliffe* complex, Private Slaney was to run afoul of the Battalion authorities: on August 3 he was fined one day's pay for having been *Absent Without Leave*, likely having been arrested as he returned to his quarters – but there appear to be no further details of the incident in his record.



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

On September 15, 1915, the 25th Battalion marched out of *East Sandling* and *Shorncliffe Camp* in the late afternoon en route for 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 some 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: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. 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 the station at Pont de Briques for the train which was to take them into northern France, not far from the frontier with Belgium which it was soon to cross, and not far distant from the large centre of Hazebrouk.

By September 23, the Nova Scotia Unit, by the 19th of the month based in the area of Locre (today *Loker*) and having had a first experience of the trenches, was relieving the 2nd Battalion, *the King's Own*, in positions to the north of the Franco-Belgian border in the area of the Kemmel-Ypres Road.

(Right: *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*)



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.

(Preceding page: 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)

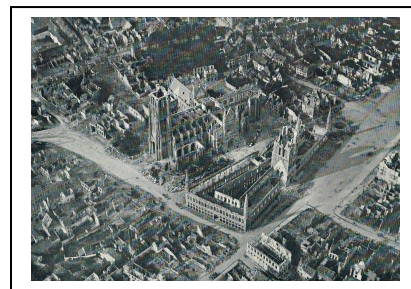
The 25th Battalion's first two casualties on active service were in fact to be self-inflicted wounds. However, on September 25...*Had one man killed in action. #67563 L/Cpl McLean J.A. was sniping and succeeded in hitting two Germans. He was in the act of taking a third shot when he was hit in the head, almost the whole top being shot off. He lived two hours unconscious...* Excerpt from 25th Battalion War Diary entry for September 25, 1915.



The 25th 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)

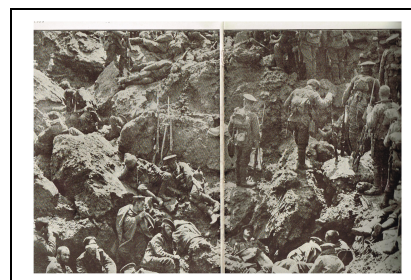
It was not to be until early April of 1916, the following year, that the 2nd Canadian Division was to undergo its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. The confrontation occurred at a place to the south of Ypres, St-Éloi, where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then followed that with an infantry assault. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to capitalize on the presumed British success, to later hold and to consolidate the newly-won territory.



(Right above: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the Second Battle of Ypres - which shows the empty shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was to be little left standing. – from Illustration)

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. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

Towards the end of the engagement at St-Éloi the 25th Battalion relieved another battalion and subsequently had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the unit had known on any single occasion up until that date. The action was over quickly for Private Slaney's unit.



(Preceding page: *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*)

Six weeks after the *Action of the St. Eloi Craters*, in early June, the 25th 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 Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.

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



The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, thereupon 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: *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.



(continued)

(Preceding page: *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 Hooze, 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*)

The newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division* was to be the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust which had begun on June 2, but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division then apparently played a role sufficiently important – manning defensive positions - for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle honour won by the unit during the Great War.

**The 3rd 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.*

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

However, during the first days of the confrontation, there is little if anything in the 25th Battalion's War Diary that exhibits any extraordinary military activity on Private Slaney's unit's front. In fact, the total casualties for the short period June 2 to 4 inclusive amounted to twelve wounded at most.



The entire Battalion War Diary for June 5 reads as follows: *Intelligence summary, patrol reports attached. 1 O.R. Killed, 1 O.R. Wounded.*

The son of Theophilus Slaney, fisherman – deceased from consumption December 22, 1912, and of Maria Lydia Slaney (née Fitzpatrick)* – deceased September 15, 1906, also from consumption, he was also older brother to David-Joseph (the name Theophilus is found on some papers).

**The couple married in 1894.*

Private Slaney was reported as having been *killed in action* while serving with his 25th Battalion during the fighting at *Mount Sorrel*.

Alonzo Slaney had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-one years: date of birth in Saint Lawrence, Newfoundland, May 26, 1893 (from attestation papers); however, the (original) Newfoundland Birth Register cites 1895 as the year.

Private Alonzo Slaney 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) (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*. Last updated – January 24, 2023.