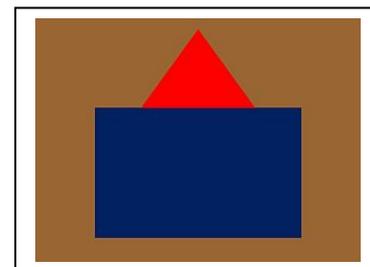




Private John Bannister (Number 877187) 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is buried in Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension No. 1*: grave reference VI.G.38.

**Four soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment are also interred there. As well, there is a number of German dead.*

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a school teacher, John Bannister appears to have left behind him little or no history of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia*.



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

**It is possible that he is the J. Bannister – soldier, on his way to the camp at Broughton – who travelled on the Kyle from Port aux Basques to North Sydney on May 25 of 1916 having been granted leave to visit his parents. This, however, is only speculation.*

His first pay records document that the Canadian Army began to remunerate Private Bannister for services rendered beginning on February 16 of 1916, the same paper also recording this as the date on which he – having presented himself in the industrial town of Sydney - was *taken on strength* by the 185th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Highlanders*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

It was three weeks after his enlistment, on May 8 and once again at Sydney, that Private Bannister underwent a medical examination and also his attestation. It was not, however, until April 26th that this all became official: on that day Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker Day, Commanding Officer of the 185th Battalion declared (on paper) that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Perhaps because of his having been a teacher, also perhaps because of a slight physical handicap – a broken leg as an infant had left him with one leg shorter than the other – he was posted to the Battalion's staff personnel.

It is likely that those final formalities of April 26 took place at the almost-abandoned town of Broughton* on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. This was where the 185th Battalion was based and where it underwent at least some of its training**; up to twelve hundred soldiers could be accommodated there at any one time.

**It had been built as a mining-town towards the end of the nineteenth century for the Cape Breton coal, Iron & Railway Company to exploit a coal seam in the area. Unfortunately for the investors, they were unable to transport the coal to port. They had also spent lavishly to create the town and, heavily in debt, had gone bankrupt in 1907.*

***Another source records the venue as being the military complex of Valcartier although there appears to be little to confirm this.*

Having signed a paper allotting a monthly twenty dollars to his father on October 1, Private Bannister embarked with the 185th Battalion – thirty-three officers, fifty-two sergeants and nine-hundred fifty-three *other ranks* - in the harbour at Halifax ten days later, on October 11. The vessel was His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister ship to *Britannic* – to be sunk by a mine that November while in use in the Mediterranean as a hospital ship – and also to the ill-fated *Titanic*.



(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

(continued)

One of the largest ships afloat at the time, *Olympic* was capable of carrying well over the six-thousand or so troops that she off-times did during and after the war. On this occasion, not only was the 185th Battalion taking passage, but so were the 85th, 188th, 113th and 219th Battalions of Canadian Infantry, as well as a half-battalion of the 166th. Such were the logistics involved of such a number of passengers that Private Bannister embarked on October 11: he did not sail for a further two days.

Sailing on October 13, 1916, *Olympic* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on the 19th. From there the 185th Battalion was transferred by train to *Camp Witley*, a Canadian military establishment on the border separating the English counties of Surrey and Hampshire.

Private Bannister was stationed at Witley for some fifteen months, until early 1918. The Battalion War Diary entry of February 13 then notes the following: *Orders received to furnish reinforcements of 100 men each to the following Units in France: 25th Bn., 85th Bn., R.C.R. The remainder of the Battalion to be absorbed by the 17th Reserve, Bramshott.*

Private Bannister was to be attached to the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) and training for him and for the other draftees to the Continent began to proceed apace at Witley.

The final entry of the 185th Battalion War Diary was type-written on February 23 of 1918. The remaining personnel were to be absorbed into the 17th (*Reserve*) Battalion – apparently this had already transpired *on paper* on February 15.

It was to be yet another six days before Private Bannister set foot in France; on that same day, March 1 of 1918, he was *officially* transferred to the 25th Battalion, already in France. There seems to be no reference in his file of either the ports from and to which he sailed, or the name of the vessel, but the War Diary of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Base Depot at Étaples notes the arrival of three-hundred thirteen reinforcements from England to the Canadian Base Depot on that same date.



(Right above: *A view of the French port-city of Le Havre – where Private Bannister likely disembarked - at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

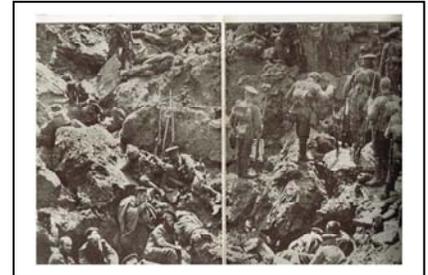
The same Diary also notes the departure of five-hundred ninety-nine personnel two days following, on March 3, the date on which Private Bannister is recorded as having left the Base Depot to join the 25th Battalion already serving on the Continent. It may be that the following eleven days were spent on the march as he is not recorded as reporting *to duty in the field* until March 14, 1918, when a draft of one-hundred eight *other ranks* arrived at Raimbert where the Battalion was serving at the time.

* * * * *

The 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and – for by far the most part – in Belgium for some thirty months by this time, since mid-September of 1915. The Battalion was a unit of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division.

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action, the *Action of the St-Éloi Craters*. It was at a place to the south of Ypres – unsurprisingly St-Éloi - where, at the end of March, on the 27th, the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then attacked. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which had turned the just-created craters into ponds and the shattered 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 that confrontation the 25th Battalion had 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.

(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*)

**One event that was noted in the same Diary during this winter period occurred on February 20. Up until this time the British Army Administration – and this also affected the Empire (Commonwealth) troops which were governed by it – had not seen fit to equip its soldiers with protection for the head – but then neither had any other army – and the troops had thus incurred numerous scalp wounds, particularly from shrapnel. The Battalion War Diary entry on this date notes the arrival of four-hundred fifty steel helmets.*

Then in June the Battalion had been involved in the fighting in the area of *Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Hill 60 and Maple Copse*, all just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division had played a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle honour won by the unit during the Great War.



(Right above: *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*)

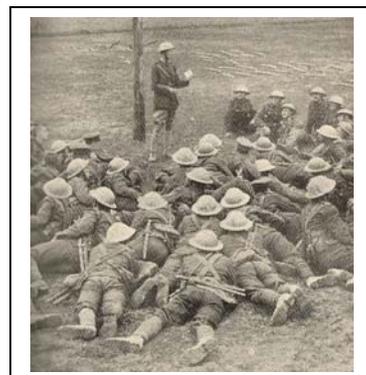
From the middle of June up until August 27 of 1916, 20, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14. Some two weeks later, the unit was withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde, thence to the village of Mouille.

(continued)

The following week at Moule was spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which had replaced the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and also in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding exactly to plan.

By that 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 – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.

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



On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those 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 had lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.

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 two villages, Flers and Courcelette.



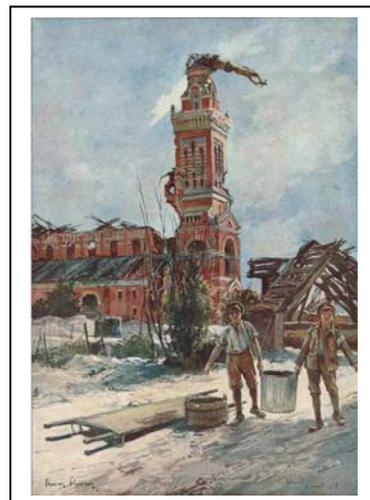
(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette – photograph from 2015*)

Meanwhile, by the evening of September 10, the unit was at the large military camp which had been established at the Brickfields (*La Briqueterie*) in the proximity of the provincial town of Albert.

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

On the morrow the *25th Battalion* had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning, September 15, the Canadians were to be going to the attack.

(Excerpt from *25th Battalion War Diary* entry for September 15, 1916): *5th Brigade* attacked and captured the Town of Courcelette... the *25th Battalion* moved forward as though on General Inspection the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...



Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who went over *the top* on the day of the assault, the War Diary recorded thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.

**It seems likely that some of the missing later returned to duty as a later Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred all ranks and twelve machine-guns – received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as *KENORA* and *REGINA*... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over *KENORA* up to *REGINA*, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...

The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right above: *Ninety-eight years later, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

(Right: *Wounded at the Somme being transported in hand-carts from the forward area for further medical attention – from Le Miroir*)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* and from the area of *the Somme*. It had then made its way westwards and then northwards, Arras, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. It remained in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay for the next four months or so before returning southward to Neuville St-Vaast. One of the neighbouring communities, in German hands at the time, was the village of Vimy.

(Right above: *A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

On April 9 in that spring of 1917, the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



If the British effort was to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Right: *the Canadian National Memorial which since 1937 stands on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)



On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it entirely of its German occupants.

From April 2 until April 7, the 25th Battalion had been in intense training on ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain to be attacked. On the 8th it moved forward – although apparently not via those well-known tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

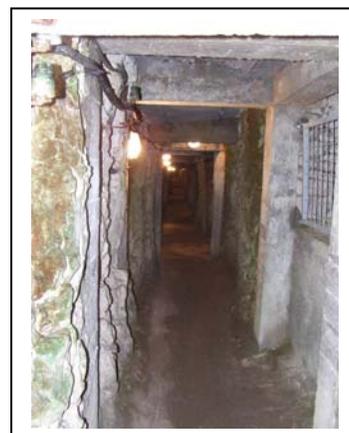
(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped with all the paraphernalia of war on the advance across No-Man's-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)



(Right below: *One of the few remaining tunnels still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

The Canadian 2nd Division was not responsible for the Ridge itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the slope and on the right-hand side of the attack. On April 9 the Battalion's objectives were apparently soon captured and much of the remainder of the day was spent in consolidating these newly-won positions.

The Germans, having lost the Ridge and the advantages of the high ground, retreated some three kilometres in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times was made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May.



The 25th Battalion, as a unit of the Canadian 2nd Division, served in various capacities on these occasions. Otherwise, the Canadians were engaged in the everyday routines of trench warfare*.

(continued)

****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 the forward area, the latter 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: 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 – from Illustration)



At the official conclusion of the *Battle of Arras*, the Canadians of the 25th Battalion were ordered posted to an area not far to the north of Vimy, to the mining centre of the city of Lens and other nearby communities.

Only days again after this first change of sector, the unit had been withdrawn on June 1 to a *Corps Rest Area* in the proximity of Crouy-Serviens, a community to the north-east of the city of Arras and therefore just north of the theatre of the just-terminated battle of that name. There the unit was to rest, to re-enforce and to re-organize.

Having spent the entire month of June in the *Rest Area*, on July 1 the 25th Battalion was ordered to move forward once more and by the 3rd it had relieved two battalions of the British Leicestershire Regiment.

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention from this area – and also his reserves - it had also ordered operations to take place in the sectors of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be the major contributor to this effort.

(Right above: An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)

One of the primary objectives was to be Hill 70 in the outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

(Right: Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)



Those expecting Hill 70 to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear. Yet it was high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture arguably more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute.* – photograph from 1914)



Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of Hill 70 over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved.

On the 16th several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points. These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Hill 70 remained in Canadian hands.

As for the role played by the 25th Battalion in this confrontation, at two-thirty in the morning of August 14, the nineteen officers and five-hundred ninety-two *other ranks* of the unit had moved from the rear to relieve units in the front line in the Lens suburb of *Cité St-Pierre*, there to prepare for the assault still some twenty-four hours away. That attack came to pass at five-thirty on the following morning, August 15.

The objectives were reached, taken, and then consolidated in the expectation of the usual German counter-attacks. The rest of that day, however, was apparently quiet, the Battalion's casualties totalling a relatively sparse fifty-three. The following twenty-four hours on the other hand, were to be less calm due to heavy German artillery fire and infantry attacks. On that day the casualty numbers doubled.

By the time that the 25th Battalion retired on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*. The Battalion was however, almost immediately despatched back into the forward area, to be relieved on August 22nd by which time a further fifty *killed, wounded and missing* had been added to the preceding total.

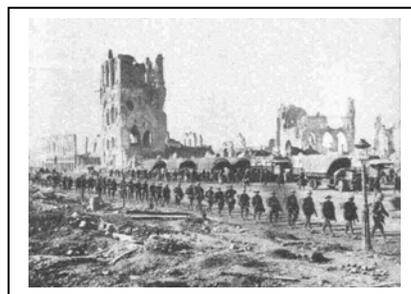
After that early summer of relatively little infantry activity, the attack on August 15 in the area of Hill 70 and the city of Lens had been intended to be the precursor of weeks of an entire campaign. However, the British offensive further north was proceeding less well than intended and the Canadians were to be needed there. Activities other than defensive in the Lens Sector were suspended in early September.



(Right above: *Canadian troops in the area of Lens at some time during the summer of 1917* – from *Le Miroir*)

Thus, September and early October, due to events elsewhere, were not to see a continuation of that summer Canadian campaign. Instead, the time was spent preparing the Canadian Corps for a move into Belgium.

It was not until the final weeks of October that the Canadians became embroiled in the offensive to the north-east of Ypres. Officially named the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign came to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, taking that name from a small village on a ridge that was one of the British Army's objectives.



(Right: *Troops file through the rubble of the medieval city of Ypres on their way to the front in the late summer of 1917. – from Illustration*)

From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions who spearheaded the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve. From November 5 until the official end of the affair the reverse was true with the 2nd Division finally entering the remnants of Passchendaele itself.



The strength of the 25th Battalion on that November 5 was reported as being twenty-one officers and five-hundred seventy-six other ranks, not much over just half of normal battalion numbers. Was it for that reason that they were seemingly less engaged than were other units?

(Right above: *an unidentified – perhaps unidentifiable – part of the Passchendaele battlefield in the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)

During the mere three days that they were to spend at the front at this time, the casualties sustained by the 25th Battalion were comparatively fairly light: seventeen *killed in action*, sixty-seven *wounded* and six *missing in action*.



(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands on Passchendaele Ridge – photograph from 2015*)

In the late evening of November 8 the 25th Battalion was withdrawn from the area of the front line, westwards of Ypres itself. Days later, on November 12, the unit was moved out of Belgium and further south again, on the 16th reaching Camblain l'Abbé, not many kilometres distant to the west of Vimy, and in much the same area where Private Hackman had first reported to the Battalion six months previously.

During this period a national election was taking place at home and military personnel serving abroad were also to have their say. Thus the polls were open from December 1 to 17 and an overwhelming majority of the Canadian Expeditionary Force voted. Perhaps a little curiously, there appears to be no mention of the event in the 25th Battalion War Diary.

The winter of 1917-1918 was to be spent in the same area; little if any confrontational military activity for that period is reported in the Battalion War Diary.

* * * * *

The routines of trench warfare once more became the order of the day; thus was the situation into which Private Bannister reported *to duty* on March 14, at a time when the 25th Battalion had withdrawn from the forward area.

Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans came to victory in the spring of 1918. Having transferred the Divisions no longer necessary on the Eastern Front because of the Russian withdrawal from the War, the Germans launched a massive attack, Operation ‘*Michael*’, on March 21. The main blow fell at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it fell for the most part on the British and Commonwealth troops there.



(Right above: *While the Germans did not attack Lens in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it heavily during the time of their offensive in order to keep the British uncertain about their intentions and thus to oblige them to retain troops in the area. – from Le Miroir*)

On March 23 the unit was moved further south to the area of St-Aubin on the outskirts of Arras, arriving there on the 24th. The Battalion was ‘*standing-by*’, ready to move on short notice, owing to expectations of an attack by the enemy.

The German advance was to continue for a month, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens*. The ultimate failure of the offensive would be a result of a combination of factors: British and Commonwealth resistance, fatigue, logistical problems and French co-operation with the British were the most significant.

**A second but lesser such offensive, ‘Georgette’, fell in northern France and in Belgium on April 9, in the area where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving with the British 29th Division. It also was successful for a while, but was petering out by the end of the month.*

(Right: *British troops on the retreat in Flanders in April of 1918 – from Illustration*)



From the time of the German attack of March 22 the 25th Battalion had *stood by* on several occasions in the trenches, on the alert for an expected German attack. This attack on Private Bannister’s unit never materialized, however, the enemy offensive being just to the south of the Arras area where the Battalion was posted.



(continued)

(Previous page: *Arras had already been badly damaged before this photograph was taken towards the end of 1915; there was yet more to come.* – from *Le Miroir*)

On March 29, the unit had just completed an all-night march from Raimbert via Houdain and St-Aubin to Wailly where it was once more placed in the forward lines in anticipation of yet another attack which never came. The Battalion War Diary reports that the day was wet and cold and that the troops had not had a meal for twenty-four hours.

On the following day, March 30, the same source reports artillery activity, the weather still wet and cold, and still no enemy attack. The Diarist also entered: *Casualties – 1 O.R. accidentally wounded.*

(Right above: *Canadian artillery under camouflage on the Arras Front in the vicinity of Lens – from *Illustration**)



The documents appear to offer no further details other than that... *No 715966 Private J Carter* to blame.* Presumably it was his weapon that discharged, inflicting gun-shot wounds to Private Bannister's legs – apparently it was the left leg which suffered the greater injury.

**Private John Carter was a fellow Newfoundlander from Cape Ray and had been serving at the front since the end of 1916, during which period, on March 6, he had been awarded a Good Conduct Badge. Wounded in August of 1918, he eventually recovered fully and returned to Canada. There is no mention at all in his personal dossier about the incident involving Private Bannister.*

He is reported as having been evacuated to the 6th Canadian Field Ambulance. This unit, however, was in the throes of moving on that date so he may well have been afforded only a minimum of temporary treatment there before being forwarded – still on March 30 - to the 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital at Doullens.

(Above right: *A view of the provincial town of Doullens at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



The son of Heber Ernest George Bannister, fisherman - to whom he had willed his all - and of Mary Ann Bannister (née *Bailey*) of Port Rexton, he was also brother to Gilbert, to Elizabeth-Bailey, Victoria-Annie, Isadora, to Julia and to Salome. Private Bannister was reported as having *died of wounds (accidental)* on that same March 30, at the same 3rd Canadian Stationary Hospital.

John Bannister had enlisted at the *apparent age* of twenty-four years and three months: date of birth in Port Rexton, Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, December 6, 1891.

(continued)

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

