

Private Herbert William Fenwick Blackall (Number 832412) of the 49<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Edmonton Regiment*), Canadian Expeditionary Force – and also Number 448 of the Newfoundland Regiment - having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference, 18-26-28.

(Right above: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Edmonton Regiment) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

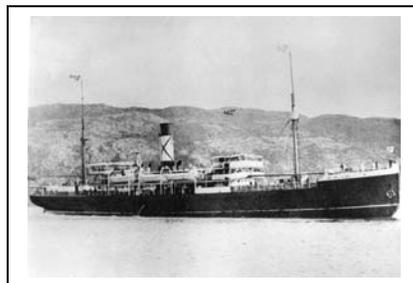
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a school-teacher, he had also been a member of the Church Lads Brigade. As his number suggests, Herbert Blackall had been among the first to enlist – at the daily private soldier’s rate of \$1.10, and for a single year of service\* - in the Newfoundland Regiment, having done so on September 8 of 1914.

*\*At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

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Lance Corporal Blackall embarked in St. John's harbour on October 3 as a non-commissioned officer of the *First Five Hundred* onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel*, having received this first promotion on September 21, some two weeks previously.

The ship sailed on the morrow to accompany the convoy carrying the Canadian Division\* across the Atlantic and arrived in the English south-coast port of Plymouth. There *Florizel* sat at anchor for some five days before her charges were finally disembarked on October 19.



(Right: *The photograph of Florizel is shown by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum, Mount Pearl.*)

*\*It was to be designated as the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division only after the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division.*

Once in the United Kingdom, Lance Corporal Blackall trained with the Regiment: firstly in southern England then in Scotland at Fort George (near right), at Edinburgh Castle where he was once more promoted, on this occasion to the rank of corporal, on April 23.



In early May, after Edinburgh, the Regiment was transferred to Stobs Camp near the town of Hawick – a third promotion, to sergeant, coming on July 26 - before a final few weeks of training for the senior Companies at Aldershot in that summer of 1915.

(Far right above: *The Newfoundland Regiment parades at Stobs Camp and is presented its Colours on June 10, 1915. – courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo*)

The purpose of this period at Aldershot was to prepare what was now an up-to-strength 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment for *active service* on the Gallipoli Peninsula at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. But even though he had been one of the *First Five Hundred* and had sailed from Newfoundland as one of 'A' Company, Sergeant Blackall was not to embark for the Middle East. Instead, he was ordered to accompany the junior companies to the new Regimental Depot to continue training.

The Regimental Depot had been established during that summer of 1915 in the Royal Borough of Ayr on the west coast of Scotland, there to serve as a base for the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion. It was from Ayr – as of November of 1915 until January of 1918 – that the new-comers from home were despatched in drafts, at first to Gallipoli and later to the Western Front, to bolster the four fighting companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.



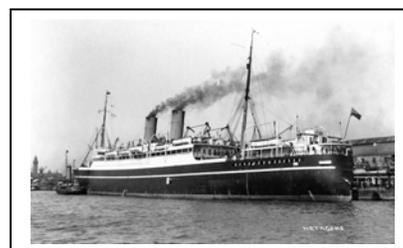
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(Preceding page: *an aerial view of Ayr – probably from the period between the Wars: Newton-on-Ayr is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough is to the right. – courtesy of the Carnegie Library at Ayr*)

After some four months of duty at Ayr, on November 27, Sergeant Blackall was appointed to the rank of Second Lieutenant – receiving his Imperial Commission on that date\*. He was, however, to be an officer for a mere forty-four days as he relinquished his new status on January 10 of the New Year, 1916.

*\*His files suggest that he was also appointed as Company Quarter Master Sergeant on that same November 27, a rank which was superseded at once by the new status of officer.*

A passenger list of the *Canadian Pacific* vessel RMS *Metagama* records a Herbert Blackall as travelling from Liverpool to St. John's, Newfoundland, and arriving there on January 30. It appears, however, that his final destination – did he change his mind during the voyage? - was St. John, New Brunswick, this information also recorded on the same passenger list.



(Right: *The photograph of RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Metagama is from the Old Ship Pictures Galleries Web-Site.*)

Further documentation then reveals a H. Blackall travelling on February 29 on board the SS *Kyle* from Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, to North Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, on his way to serve as a teacher at Amherst. Nothing appears to confirm these two travellers as being the same person – or indeed *either* of them to be Herbert Blackall, late of the Newfoundland Regiment – but the coincidence is suggestive.

Herbert Blackall is then recorded as having enlisted for a second time – on this occasion into the Canadian Army – in Moncton on March 3 of 1916, on which day he also underwent a medical examination and his attestation. He was attached forthwith to the 145<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion (*New Brunswick*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was apparently appointed to the rank of sergeant on the day of his enlistment. On May 21 he was designated a company sergeant major.

The 145<sup>th</sup> Battalion was to leave Canada for overseas service in the early fall of that year 1916. The unit embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Tuscania* in the east-coast port of Halifax for the trans-Atlantic passage on September 26 of 1916, the vessel sailing on the following day. *Tuscania* docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on October 6.



(Right: *The photograph of HMT Tuscania is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

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Company Sergeant Major Blackall and the 145<sup>th</sup> Battalion were not to take passage for the United Kingdom alone. On board *Tuscania* were travelling at least two other military units: the 113<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Canadian Infantry and the 7<sup>th</sup> Draft of the Canadian Army Service Corps TD (Transport?) Number 2.

Having disembarked, the 145<sup>th</sup> Battalion was sped by train to the Canadian establishment at Shorncliffe, adjacent to the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone in the county of Kent. There the new arrivals were nominally transferred to the 9<sup>th</sup> Canadian (Reserve) Battalion with CSM Blackall retaining his rank with 'B' Company – attached to it as of December 17 - in this new arrangement.



(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: 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)



On January 24 of 1917, the 9<sup>th</sup> Reserve Battalion, in the throes of being absorbed by a new 9<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) Battalion, began a transfer to the Canadian military establishment at Bramshott in the southern English county of Hampshire. By January 24, the new Battalion – and CSM Blackall with it - was in its new quarters.



(Right: Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016)

It may well have been the frustration at not being sent on *active service* which had led Second Lieutenant Blackall to resign his Commission in the Newfoundland Regiment and subsequently to join the Canadians. If this were so then he must once more have experienced the same sentiments when, as a company sergeant major, he was yet again withheld from embarking to serve in a theatre of war in the late winter of 1917.

On March 5 of 1917, a draft was scheduled to sail to the Continent – without CSM Blackall. On that same day he requested to revert to the rank of private in order to be included in that draft. His request was granted and he proceeded to France – likely from nearby Folkestone to the French port of Boulogne on the coast opposite, just two hours' sailing-time distant.

Thus on March 6, it was Private Blackall who was nominally transferred to the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion and arrived at the Canadian Infantry Base Depot in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre at the mouth of the River Seine.

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

He was apparently to be at the Depot for twenty-five days undergoing final training and organization before being despatched to the parent unit of the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He did so as one of a re-enforcement draft which left for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Entrenching Battalion\*, stationed at the time at Mont St-Éloi, on March 31, and where he reported to duty on April 3.



*\*In the early days of the conflict, infantry battalions dug their own trenches, ditches and whatever else needed to be dug. It proved not to be a very efficient method of getting things done, thus specialized units were created, drafting men of the right physique and stamina, and also those who had experience in that sort of work. When these battalions were disbanded, many of the personnel were transferred to engineering units.*



*These entrenching battalions were often strategically positioned behind the front lines – where there was always construction work to do – but were also prepared to move up to the forward area as and when needed. Thus they were deemed to be useful as re-enforcement pools where drafts could be sent from Base Depot to work until such time as the combat units were ready to receive the new arrivals.*



(Right top: *Canadian sappers here doing the specialized work of road-building in the spring of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

(Right above and right: *The village of Mont St-Éloi\* at an early period of the Great War and again, a century later - The ruins of the Abbey St-Éloi – destroyed in 1783 – are visible in both images. – from Le Miroir and (colour) from 2016*)



*\*Not to be confused with the Belgian village of St-Éloi where the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division fought an action in the spring of 1916.*

It was to be a further month before he was again transferred, and despatched to join the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion; Private Blackall did so on May 3 and is recorded as having arrived on that same day, one of a contingent of forty other ranks.

\* \* \* \* \*

The 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*Edmonton Regiment*) had disembarked in France at the port of Boulogne on October 9 of 1915, a unit of the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division. Days later it was in the area of the Franco-Belgian frontier and on October 16, had entered the trenches of the Western Front for the first time, on the southern end of the line in Belgium, in a region that English-speakers call Flanders.

For the following five months the personnel of the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion were to remain in the same area. During that period the Battalion War Diary entries for each day look remarkably alike – documenting the everyday rigours and routines of life in 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, 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 above: 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)*

On March 20-21, the situation changed – if not radically then seriously – for the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion when it marched from its former sector to the town of Poperinghe. There it took a train for the short journey to Ypres. The unit had been transferred to the *Ypres Salient*.

The venerable medieval city of Ypres – today leper - even by this early date in the War had been transformed into rubble by the everyday German artillery bombardments and by two major battles – to both of which it had lent its name – that had already taken place\*. It had been the second of these confrontations which had seen the first use of gas – chlorine - on a large scale, during which the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division had distinguished itself.



*\*There were to be two more.*

*(Right above: A Belgian aerial photograph showing the devastation of Ypres in 1915 – the city is described as ‘morte’ (dead) – from Illustration)*

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division took its place in the line in an area just to the south-east of the ramparts of the city, in the trenches at places such as the village of *Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60* and *Maple Copse*.

It took just twenty-four hours for the enemy artillery to welcome them: 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion casualties for March 22 were two killed, two wounded, two shell-shocked; for March 23-24, four wounded; for March 25, three killed, thirteen wounded, ten wounded and shell-shocked. Thus passed its first tour in the *Salient* trenches. Worse was to come.

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

(Right below: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the southwest of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance. – photograph from 1914*)

The 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 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.



On June 2 the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been in the rear area. Orders which soon arrived to be *prepared* to move were followed by others ordering the unit forward. The intensity of the enemy shell-fire was such that the Battalion was obliged to take shelter in the area of those ramparts of Ypres. Later that evening it moved further towards the front so as to be in position for the counter-attack planned for the following morning.

On the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion front the counter-offensive was *apparently successful... making substantial gains, attacking with energy and vigour. Battn held all positions throughout 3<sup>rd</sup> and was relieved at 12 M.N. 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>...* (Excerpt from 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diary)



Success is oft-times relative: Casualties for the day were fifty-two *killed in action*, two-hundred sixty-four *wounded in action* and sixty-nine *missing in action*.

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

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Battalion did not participate in any further action at *Mount Sorrel*, not even in the successful final Canadian counter-attack of June 13 which restored the situation to much the way it had been at the outset. The 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion remained in rest billets until June 20.

The subsequent weeks were spent in the same sector and in much the same manner as had been the period prior to the engagement, in the everyday drudgery of trench warfare – but likely preferable to the excitement of the battle just fought.

On the night August 21-22 the unit was relieved and, having taken the train to travel the fifteen or so kilometres to the town of Poperinghe – where it also had a collective bath – it remained there for a day before setting off for Cassel on August 24. There the personnel was billeted – *poorly*, according to the War Diary - and started to drill on the morrow.

Each Canadian Division in its turn was to be eventually withdrawn from the front area to undergo a period of training. The troops that were to take the Canadians' place in Belgium had been withdrawn from the area of *the Somme*. These units, troops from the British Isles – and a single battalion from the Dominion of Newfoundland – were exhausted and depleted from their recent exertions, and in need of re-enforcement and re-organization.



(Right above: *The entrance – recently reconstructed – to the Newfoundland Regiment's 'A' Company quarters in the ramparts of Ypres when it was posted there in 1916 – photograph from 2010*)

Training for the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion continued until September 7 when it packed its baggage, cleaned its billets and marched to the railway-station at Esquelbecq. Having boarded a train which pulled out at one-thirty in the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>, the unit travelled overnight to Conteville, in the vicinity of which community it was billeted until September 10.

On that day the unit began to march – billeting each night in various communities along the route – until, on September 13, it reached its destination, the military camp at Tara Hill, close to not only the provincial town of Albert, but also – uncomfortably so at times - to the German guns.

The 1<sup>st</sup> *Battle of the Somme* had by that time 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.

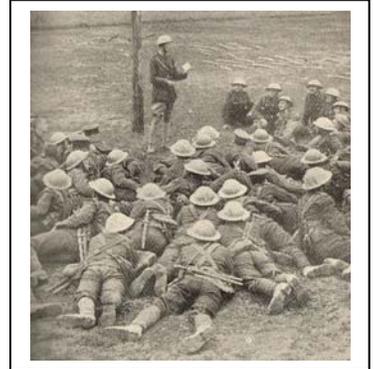
On that first day all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles who were serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.



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

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 Courcelette.

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



Having arrived as planned at *Tara Hill Camp* on September 13, the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion had only forty-eight hours to wait until it was ordered forward. At three o'clock on the afternoon of September 15 it had moved into the line, there to await the signal to attack at six-fifteen. The battalion was not alone; on that day, both the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Divisions were involved, as a part of a general attack undertaken by an Allied force totalling three Armies.

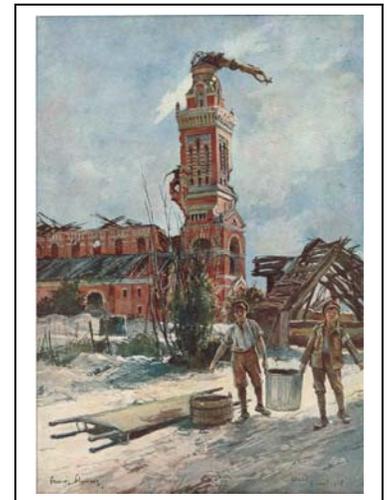
(Right below: *Canadian soldiers in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration*)

The day was one of mixed results and the cost heavy. The Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division had been successful in its attack in the area of the village of Courcelette and had captured the Sugar Factory. The 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division – of which the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a component – had secured a trench and also a part of a German strong-point; but against a determined opposition it had found any further advance difficult. So it had dug in, to remain *in situ* despite heavy shelling and thus heavy casualties until the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> when it was relieved piecemeal and withdrew to Tara Hill.

Casualties for the four days – and recorded on the 18<sup>th</sup> - had mounted to forty-three killed, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and nineteen missing.

The Battalion was back in the front line in early October and then again on October 7. On this second occasion it was to be ordered to attack once again, the objective being a German complex known as *Regina Trench* which, up until this time, had resisted all efforts to capture it. The attempt was to be a combined operation, in co-operation with the Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment.

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



Following a short barrage the two battalions advanced, not entirely successfully. The 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion was caught by machine-gun and rifle fire not only from the front but on both flanks. Any gains were limited. It retired later that day to count the cost: a total of two-hundred twenty-one all ranks.



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

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



On October 10, two days later, the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched out of Albert and away from 1<sup>st</sup> Somme. The battle still had a further five weeks to run, but that would be the task for other Canadian units which were even then just still arriving. The Battalion's numbers at the outset of the withdrawal totalled four-hundred seventeen all ranks, well under fifty per-cent of normal battalion strength.

There now followed a fourteen-day period during which the main activity was to march, after a westward beginning then turning to the north. The Battalion passed to the western side of the city of Arras and then beyond, to halt in the area of Brigade Reserve, Neuville St-Vaast. There, on the following morning, it moved into the front line, relieving a battalion of the London Regiment.

(Right below: *Canadian troops making their way to the front during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)



The winter months of 1917 were spent by the Battalion in the sector of Neuville St-Vaast to the south-west of Lens, where the personnel were now to settle back into the daily grind of trench warfare. For the most part casualties were few and due for the most part to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers.

There was the habitual patrolling but little concerted infantry action – except for the occasional raid which the High Command thought kept the troops on their toes and which the same High Command thought to be good for morale and for the *offensive spirit*: apparently the lowly soldier ordered to undertake them was less enthusiastic.

Thus the routines continued until February 13 when the Battalion was withdrawn on March 23 for thirty-eight days of special training in the vicinity of the commune of Bruay before being returned to the more-forward area of Villers-au-Bois – still not *exactly* in the front-line trenches.

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On April 1 the unit returned to Bruay for final training. Then by platoons and companies, on the 6<sup>th</sup>, the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>, the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved into prepared dug-outs, ready to play its role in the by-then imminent offensive.

On April 9 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 few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of Vimy Ridge on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

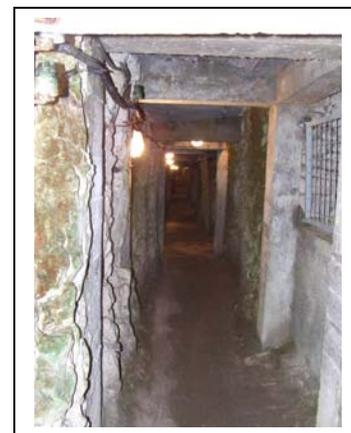


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was a disaster.

(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which since 1936, 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 almost entirely of its German occupants.

In his report pertaining to the operation at Vimy Ridge, Lt. Colonel Palmer, Commanding Officer of the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion, was generous in his praise of the tunnels which had been built for reasons of both secrecy and safety. Although not mentioned in the War Diary itself, they were surely used by personnel of the unit as a means to access at least some of the assembly areas.



Men of the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion were among the first to leave the trenches, having been given the task of mopping-up after the attacking troops had passed on. They had gone over the top a five-thirty on that Easter Monday.

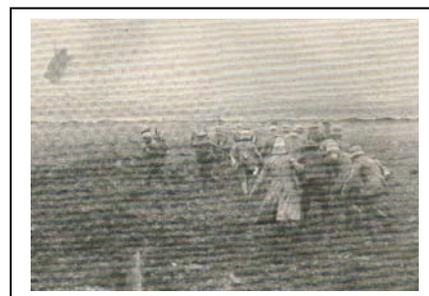
(Right above: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

By six o'clock one platoon of the Battalion was ordered to escort prisoners to the rear; at seven-thirty it was reported that the first objective had been reached despite heavy enemy shell-fire; at seven-fifty a further enemy trench was reported as having been taken; at five minutes past nine more men were needed to escort prisoners; at ten-forty two platoons moved forward to re-enforce a company of the Royal Canadian Regiment; at five past eleven mopping-up was reported as completed; by two-fifteen in the afternoon all Battalion personnel were being employed to carry supplies forward...

The attack on Vimy Ridge had been an unprecedented success.

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On April 10, the advance continued but at a much slower cadence. As the German positions were reached, cleared and captured, the attacking Canadians thereupon stopped as ordered, in order to consolidate them in anticipation of German counter-attacks.



(Right: *German prisoners on Vimy Ridge being escorted back through the Canadian lines – from an official Canadian photograph via Illustration*)

(Right: *Canadian troops of either the 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, and 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 – official Canadian photograph from Illustration*)



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. And it all had to be paid for.

However, in early May the Battalion War Diarist records the unit as being in reserve at Villers-au-Bois, not at Fresnoy, and engaged with priorities such as baths and kit inspection. On May 3 in the morning it was undergoing training as per the Army syllabus, and having an afternoon of sport to look forward to.

Whether Private Blackall arrived there in time to participate is not documented, but May 3 at Villers-au-Bois was when and where he reported to duty with the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion.



(Right above: *Canadian soldiers perusing the upcoming program at a make-shift theatre in a camp somewhere behind the lines – from Le Miroir*)

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After May 15, cited as the date of the *official* conclusion of the *Battle of Arras* – the taking of Vimy Ridge occurring on the first day, April 9, of this five-week offensive - the Canadians remained *in* – or returned to - the sectors where they had been before the battle. Thus life again resumed in the respective forward, support and reserve areas.

The immediate posting for Private Blackall was to the front lines in the area of Avion, in the southern vicinity of Lens. His baptism of fire was to be sooner rather than later, and was likely memorable.

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It came about just prior to midnight on June 8 when a large-scale raid – three battalions plus two companies – was launched against the German positions opposite. According to the War Diarist... *All objectives were gained and attacking troops after spending considerable time in the enemy's works wrecking his dug-outs and strong points returned to assembly trenches by 2.15 a.m... Approximately 200 German were accounted for and 35 prisoners taken...*

All of this was at a cost – to the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion alone – of twenty *killed*, one-hundred thirty-four *wounded* and fourteen *missing*. Despite the Diarist's positive appraisal of the venture, there seem to be recorded no further such raids during the succeeding three months.

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 at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a 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 Miroir)*

The rest of July was to be quiet, most of the latter half of the month spent withdrawn and in training behind the forward area. For Private Blackall's unit, this apparently carried over into August, until the 20<sup>th</sup>.



*(Right: A Canadian carrying-party – some of the work done by troops when in support and reserve – on the Lens front during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)*

On August 15, *Hill 70*, just to the north of Lens, had become the primary objective of a Canadian attack. However, this action had been made the responsibility of the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions and life for the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion had continued in its routine manner.

After the early summer of relatively little infantry activity, this attack on August 15 in the area of *Hill 70*, and on 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.

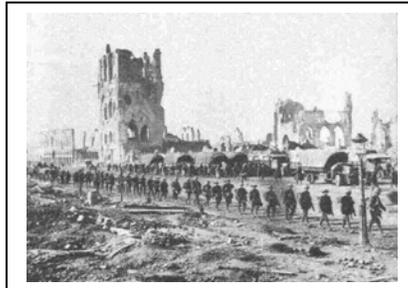
Thus offensive activities in the Lens Sector were suspended by early September and the Canadians began training for service once more in Belgium.



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

It was not until the final weeks of October, 1917, that the Canadians became embroiled in the British 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*)

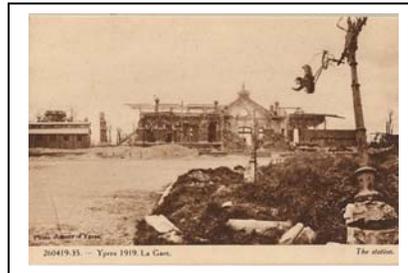


From the time that the Canadians entered the fray, it was they who shouldered a great deal of the burden. From the week of October 26 until November 3 it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions who spearheaded the assault, with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions in reserve.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

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



For the 49<sup>th</sup> Battalion and for Private Blackall the sortie into Belgium began on October 16 when the Battalion entrained for Cæstre before marching to nearby Borre. It remained billeted there until October 23 when, having returned to Cæstre, it entrained for Ypres. There it left the train and marched across the city to the north-east, to the remnants of Wieltje. At Wieltje, Battalion personnel were employed for working-parties, carrying-parties, evacuating the wounded and for working – with the Royal Engineers – laying tracks.



(Right above: *The railway station at Ypres (leper) in 1919 – from a vintage post-card*)

October 28 saw the unit – twenty-two officers and five-hundred sixty-nine *other ranks* - relieve the 116<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the front and support areas, not without incurring some twenty-five casualties while moving to the forward area. On the day of the 29<sup>th</sup> it stayed in the front and support trenches that it now occupied.

The entry in the Battalion War Diary for October 30 reads partially thus: *The Battalion attacked the German front & support lines at 5-40 A.M... Morning very clear & bright, heavy opposition met with, causing very heavy casualties, the intermediate objective was gained & held in spite of the most trying conditions from enemy machine-guns and shell-fire; estimated casualties at this date 5 officers & 65 other ranks killed, 13 officers and 260 other ranks wounded...*



(Preceding page: *A German machine-gunner dead at his post* – from *Illustration*)

The son of Dr. William Walker Blackall\* and of Mrs. Ida Blackall of 23, Forest Road, St. John's, he was at first reported as *sick* on October 30 of 1917, but then as having been *killed in action* on that same day.

*\*Dr. Blackall had been Headmaster at Bishop Feild College in St. John's before later becoming Superintendent of the Church of England Schools in Newfoundland, and with an office at the Department of Education in the Colonial Building.*



Herbert William Fenwick Blackall had enlisted in the Newfoundland Regiment at the age of twenty years: date of birth, July 2, 1894.

Private Herbert William Fenwick Blackall was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

*(The photograph of Private(?) Blackall is from an original copy of the book, *The First Five Hundred*, by Richard Cramm. – courtesy of Reg Leonard)*



