

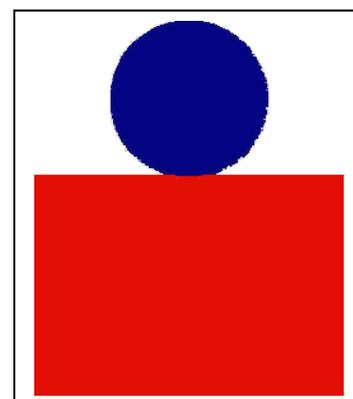


Private Gerald Francis Byrne (Number 24577) of the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion (*Royal Highlanders of Canada*) Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Menin Gate, Ypres (today *Ieper*): Panel reference, 24-26-28-30.

His occupation previous to military service recorded as that of an electrical engineer, he was to enlist at Valcartier, Québec. There appears to be little if any information of when Gerald Francis Byrne left his native Newfoundland although it appears to be likely that by the outbreak of the Great War he was already working in the greater Montreal area.

(Right above: *The image of the shoulder-patch of the 13th Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada) is from the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group web-site.*)

(continued)



His first pay records show that August 13 of 1914 – only nine days after the British Government in Westminster had declared war on behalf of the British Empire - was the first day on which Gerald Francis Byrne was remunerated for his services to the Canadian Army – thus this was surely the day of his enlistment. That small card however does not, unfortunately, allow us to know where he was on this day*, although it does show him being *taken on strength* by the 5th Regiment, Royal Highlanders of Canada*.

**It was almost certainly in Montréal as the Battalion was not to proceed to Valcartier until the very-late evening of August 24. And also, by this time, the unit then had been re-designated as the 13th Infantry Battalion (Royal Highlanders of Canada)* of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.*

(Right: *The Camp at Valcartier - In 1914, the main Army Camp in Canada was at Petawawa. However, its location in Ontario – and away from the Great Lakes – made it impractical for the despatch of troops overseas. Valcartier was apparently built within weeks after the Declaration of War. – photograph from The War Illustrated although from a later period of the War)*



Some two weeks following his enlistment, on August 29 – and by now at the Canadian Army Camp at Valcartier - Private Byrne presented himself for medical examination. He was apparently not then to attest until September 23, almost four weeks later again, this formality being overseen by Captain L.W. Whitehead, Commanding Officer of the 1st (?) Company, who on that date 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.*

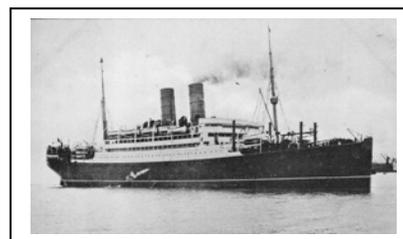
Private Byrne was now a soldier of that 1st Company of the Battalion and wearing a kilt of the Black Watch tartan.

**Although the fourth page of the Battalion War Diary, inscribed as beginning on October 15, still refers to the unit as the 5th Royal Highlanders of Canada: regimental traditions are often strong.*



(Right: *One of the several variations of the Black Watch tartan – from the Scottish Tartans Authority web-site)*

By the time that the 13th Battalion had taken ship and sailed from Québec en route to the United Kingdom it had been further organized as an element of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade which itself was a component of the 1st* Canadian Division. The ship on board which the unit was to travel was His Majesty's Transport *Alunia* – a requisitioned vessel of the *Cunard Company* – and she left the port of Québec on September 25 with the Battalion on board to travel several hundred metres upstream where she then anchored.



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****The unit was officially designated as only the Canadian Division until the 2nd Canadian Division was formed.***

(Previous page: The photograph of the Cunard Lines vessel *Alaunia* – to be sunk after hitting a mine on October 19, 1916 - is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

Alaunia remained immobile for four days at Wolfe's Cove before, on September 30, she slipped downstream. The 13th Battalion was not the only unit to have spent those days on board; there was also a detachment of the 14th Battalion of Canadian Infantry; the Headquarters of the Canadian 3rd Infantry Brigade; and there was a part of the Divisional (later to become the Canadian 1st Divisional) Train.

The convoy which was to carry the Canadian Division overseas assembled during the first days of October in the St. Lawrence estuary and in the area of the Gaspé before beginning its trans-Atlantic crossing on October 3. On the way it passed by the south coast of the Dominion of Newfoundland where it was joined on October 5 by the Bowring Brothers' steamship *Florizel* which was carrying the *First Five Hundred* of the Newfoundland Regiment.

Arriving in the English port of Plymouth on October 14, the 13th Battalion disembarked on the following day and entrained immediately for the West Down South Camp, a part of the large British military establishment on Salisbury Plain.



It arrived there during the morning of the 16th, the men having left their trains at Patney at three o'clock in the morning to march the final ten miles to the Camp.

(Right above: Ships of the convoy carrying the Canadian Expeditionary Force at anchor in Plymouth Hoe on October 14, 1914 – from *The War Illustrated*)

The unit remained at the West Down South Camp until November 17 when it was transferred to nearby Larkhill Camp, also a part of the Salisbury Plain complex. And there it was to remain in training until almost the middle of February of the next year.

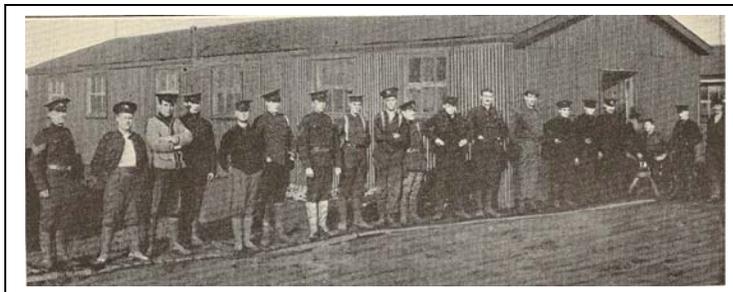
The only documented breaks in the routine for Private Byrne during this period on Salisbury Plain were to be two days *confinement to barracks* for an unspecified misdemeanour; a deduction of \$2.50 for repairs to army property – a bayonet; and the three weeks that he spent in the Number 1 General Hospital – from January 10, 1915 until January 30 – for treatment to a venereal problem.

On February 4 the Division marched to a review area where it was inspected by His Majesty, King George V and by the War Minister, Lord Kitchener*. The next few days were spent in final preparation for departure and on February 10 the 13th Battalion boarded a train to take it to the west-coast port of Avonmouth.

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**For whom the Canadian city of Kitchener, Ontario, was named in 1916 – it had been called Berlin until then.*

(Right above: Canadian troops during the autumn of 1914 at Bulford Camp, Wiltshire – from The War Illustrated)



The Battalion boarded their ship on the following day, February 11, although it was not to sail until the next day again. The ship was the SS *Novian* and not only did the personnel of the 13th Battalion board her, but so did the Divisional Ammunition Column, thus the ship was also carrying well over two-hundred horses as well.

Novian then sailed at dawn on the morning of February 12. It was apparently a very rough and unpleasant voyage, the ship's captain taking the decision to head out to sea and into the wind to avoid serious injury to the horses: it also prolonged the agony for the wretchedly-ill troops.

Three days later, on February 16, the vessel dropped anchor in the French port of St-Nazaire on the coast of Brittany, its passengers grateful to stand once again on *terra firma*. They were soon less grateful, however, to learn that it was they who had to unload the ship, the dockers having gone on strike.

But at least the horses were apparently no worse for wear.

Some two-and-a-half days later, on the... 19th Arrived at HAZEBROUCK. Got off train stiff and sore after our long and cramped journey, fell in and marched eight miles, through pouring rain, to FLETRE. (13th Battalion War Diary)



(Right: A view of the northern French town of Hazebrouck taken at some time between the wars – from a vintage post-card)

Four days later, on the... 23rd Paraded at 8 a.m. and marched to ARMENTIERES, 17 miles, very hard on the feet, roads paved with cobble-stones nearly all the way. Arrived at ARMENTIERES at 2:30 p.m. and were billeted in the Workhouse. (13th Battalion War Diary) and by the 26th all four Battalion Companies had had their first taste of life in the trenches, each company spending a day there - Private Byrne of the 1st Company had been one of the first to do so. Exactly which trenches these were is not documented but they might well have been support positions (see below).

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, by that time equipped with steel helmets and also, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)



For the succeeding eight weeks, the existence of the 13th Battalion followed a routine much as described above. Meanwhile, however, Private Byrne was once again incurring the displeasure of his superiors. The offence once more unspecified, on April 19 he was sentenced to fifteen days of Field Punishment Number 1*.

But other events were about to intervene.

**Field Punishment No. 1 consisted of the convicted man being placed in fetters and handcuffs or similar restraints and attached to a fixed object, such as a gun wheel or a fence post, for up to two hours per day. Apparently the soldier could also be subjected to hard labour and loss of pay. (Adapted from Wikipedia)*

Just prior to this incident, on April 16 Private Byrne and the Battalion had been ordered forward to the north-east of the medieval city of Ypres, near to the village of St. Julien (*Sint-Juliaan*). On the 21st the unit was ordered forward into the front trenches and did so under a heavy enemy bombardment. Worse was yet to come.



(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle - 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 little left standing. – from Illustration)

At five o'clock in the afternoon of April 22, the appearance of a large green-yellow cloud heralded the German attack which initiated the battle to be known as *Second Ypres*. French colonial troops to the left of the Canadian positions – and who received the worst of this new weapon - were routed by the chlorine gas and the Canadians were called upon to shore up defensive positions on their by-then abandoned left flank.

On the 23rd, in the confusion of the battle, uncoordinated retirements and counter-attacks were the order of the day as well as was the establishment of what were to prove to be temporary defensive positions. For the 13th Battalion it was a *quiet day*; although shelled and gassed, it was able... *to evacuate trenches which was done without the loss of a man*. The unit – and others - fell back on the Sint-Juliaan and Gravenstafel Ridge sectors.



(Previous page: *The memorial – the Brooding Soldier - which stands at the Vancouver Crossroads, Sint-Juliaan, commemorates the stand of the 1st Canadian Division during Second Ypres. – photograph from 2010*)

At dawn on the 24th another gas attack was launched by the Germans, on this occasion it was aimed directly at the Canadians. *Heavily shelled and bombarded, Machine guns very busy. Held the line until 7:30 a.m. when the Battalion was forced to retire to Reserve Trenches. Held the Reserve Trenches until 2 p.m. when we were shelled out and retired to the G.H.Q. Trenches.* (13th Battalion War Diary) The unit incurred heavy casualties.

The son of Garrett Byrne, *Bookseller & Stationer* at 357, Water Street in St. John's, and of Annie Byrne (née *Shortall*) of *Hillcrest* on Waterford Bridge Road in St. John's, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Alice, Margaret, Helen, Richard and Fred. (This from *Genealogy.com*)

Private Byrne was reported as *missing in action* on that April 24 during the fighting of the day and later *presumed dead on or soon after that date* (this presumption coming *officially* as late as August 24 of 1916).

Gerald Francis Byrne had enlisted at the age of twenty-two years and a month: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, March 10, 1893 (a second source has March 9, 1894, but no confirming – or otherwise - parish records appear to be available, except that the stone shown right has 1893).



(*Private Byrne is commemorated on a family memorial to be found in Belvedere Roman Catholic Cemetery in St. John's, Newfoundland – photograph from 2015*)

Private Gerald Francis Byrne 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).



