



Driver Robert Wooden, Number 1258174, of the 6th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Bramshott (St. Mary) Churchyard: Grave reference III.A.8..

(Right: *The image of the Canadian Field Artillery (Style "A") cap badge is from the E-Bay web-site.*)



His occupations prior to military service recorded as both those of labourer and railway-fireman, Robert Wooden has left little information behind him a propos his early life in the fishing community of Grand Bank, Newfoundland. However, the passenger list of the SS *Kyle* making the crossing of October 5, 1915, from Port aux Basques in the Dominion of Newfoundland to North Sydney in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, documents a seventeen-year old R. Wooden among those travelling.

This young man – again according to the passenger list - was on his way to work as a labourer in the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton.

If indeed this was Robert Wooden, the subject of this short biography, he was later to make the three-hundred kilometre journey from Sydney to the provincial capital of Halifax for it was there in the spring of 1917 that he was to enlist.

The files, including his first pay records, show that it was on May 14 of 1917 that he presented himself in Halifax for enlistment and for a medical examination, a procedure which was to find him...*fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force*. On the same day he was attested, his oath witnessed by a local justice of the peace.

Later again on that May 14, the formalities of enlistment were brought to a conclusion by Major J.M. Slayter, Officer Commanding the 10th (*Halifax*) Siege Battery of the Canadian Garrison Artillery – by which unit Gunner (later *Driver*) Wooden had, upon his enlistment, been *taken on strength* - when he declared – on paper – that...*Robert Wooden...having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation*.

Gunner Wooden was then to train in Halifax, but for only a short period of time – only some two weeks - before then taking ship for *overseas service*.

(Right: A photograph dated February of 1918 of a gun-team of the 2nd Canadian Siege Battery positioning one of their BL 6-inch 26 cwt* howitzers, a British gun commonly used also by Commonwealth forces. The 10th Siege Battery was eventually to be equipped with these weapons but whether this was the case at the time of Gunner Wooden's brief service with this unit is not clear. – from the Wikipedia web-site)



*The 'cwt' signifies 'hundredweight' or one hundred pounds, twenty-six hundred pounds being the weight of the breech-block. 6-inch is the calibre of the gun-barrel.

It was on May 28, 1917, that the 3rd Draft of the 10th Siege Battery, C.G.A., Gunner Wooden among its ranks, embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Olympic* in the harbour just below the Halifax Citadel.

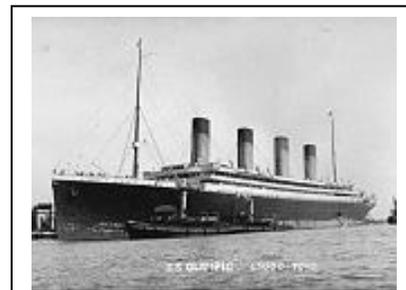
The vessel, an ocean-liner of the *White Star Line*, requisitioned by the British government for the duration of the *Great War* and its aftermath, was one of the largest ships afloat at the time.

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She needed to be on this occasion as Gunner Wooden's unit was not to travel alone: also taking passage to the United Kingdom on the ship were the 122nd, 207th, 217th, 243rd, 246th, 248th, 252nd, 253rd, 254th and 255th Canadian Infantry Battalions (undoubtedly all under-strength), the 1st Draft of the 11th Canadian Mounted Rifles, the 2nd Draft of the 191st Battalion and Part 2 of the 232nd Battalion.

Thus, as on many other occasions, *Olympic* – familiarly known as *The Old Lady* - was to be carrying some six-thousand military personnel for the Atlantic crossing.

(Right: '*Olympic*' was sister ship to '*Britannic*', sunk by a mine in the eastern Mediterranean in November of 1916, and to the ill-starred '*Titanic*'. The photograph of her is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)



After an apparently uneventful voyage, *Olympic* docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool on June 9, 1917, and by the following day Gunner Wooden and his draft had traversed the country in a south-easterly direction by train to the large Canadian complex of *Shorncliffe*, situated on the Dover Straits and in the vicinity of the harbour and town of Folkestone in the county of Kent.

Gunner Wooden's unit, once at *Shorncliffe*, was apparently to be posted to the subsidiary *Otterpool Camp*, likely for several days of the precautionary quarantine for troops arriving from Canada. At the same time, upon its arrival there on June 10, it was transferred – on paper - to the Reserve Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery where its personnel – and thus Gunner Wooden - was now placed *on Command**.

**A soldier 'on Command' was awaiting to be 'taken on strength' by a unit which had need of his services.*

On June 22-23 Gunner Wooden was posted to the 1st Brigade of the Canadian Reserve Artillery – thus ceasing to be *on Command* – even though it appears that this unit was not to *officially* come into existence until August, some five weeks hence. This force was to remain stationed at *Shorncliffe* until early September at which time it was transferred to another Canadian military establishment, *Witley Camp*, in the southern extremity of the county of Surrey.



(Right above: *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*)

Gunner Wooden was to remain for some six weeks at *Witley*, until October 14 when he was one of a draft of three-hundred fifty-nine other ranks and five officers to travel overseas – likely via the ports of Southampton and Le Havre - to the *Canadian General Base Depot* on the Continent, the facility by this time re-established from Le Havre to the vicinity of the French coastal town of Étapes. His personal files record him as having arrived there two days later, on October 16, to be *taken on strength* there by the Canadian Artillery Pool.

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

Gunner Wooden was now to remain at Étaples for twenty six days, until November 11, when he was then one to be of the 24...*departures*...documented as having left the Base Depot on that day. His destination was the *Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp* situated ninety kilometres to the east at Calonne-Ricouart where he reported to *duty* later on that same day.



Seventeen days later again, *Gunner Wooden* became *Driver Wooden** when he was ordered temporarily attached to the 3rd Canadian Divisional Train of the Canadian Army Service Corps as a loader. The grim 3rd *Battle of Ypres*, undoubtedly better known to the reader as *Passchendaele*, had recently come to its conclusion in Belgium, and the Divisional Train was, by the time of *Driver Wooden's* arrival, operating in northern France, its job to ensure the first stages of supply from the ports and the railheads to the awaiting units of the 3rd Canadian Division.

**It should be remembered that although the British and Commonwealth forces were the most mechanized of the Great War, that most mobility was still provided by animals. Thus the term 'driver' is just as likely, if not more so, to apply to horses and the like as it does to trucks (lorries) or trains.*

Apparently *Driver Wooden* and the other personnel of the 3rd Divisional Train were to be quite busy during the time of his posting, as the unit's War Diary records that it was to transport supplies over a collective distance of 3, 749 miles during the week of November 26 to December 2 (inclusive), and a further 4,540 miles in the week of December 3 to 9 (inclusive).



(Right above: *A convoy of ammunition on its way to providing shells to artillery units: This image was likely taken at the Somme during the summer offensive of 1916. – from Le Miroir*)

However, less than two weeks after this posting, on December 10, 1916, *Driver Wooden* ceased to be attached to the 3rd Divisional Train and was despatched to join the 6th Canadian Field Artillery (*Howitzer*) Brigade*.

**There had already been a 6th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade which had been disbanded before ever being ordered to the Continent. The 6th Brigade of this present file had originally been the 8th Canadian Field Artillery (Howitzer) Brigade, having changed its number to the 6th CFA Brigade (Howitzer) on October 26 of 1915 while still in England. By the time of his joining it, however, the unit was simply designated as the 6th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade.*

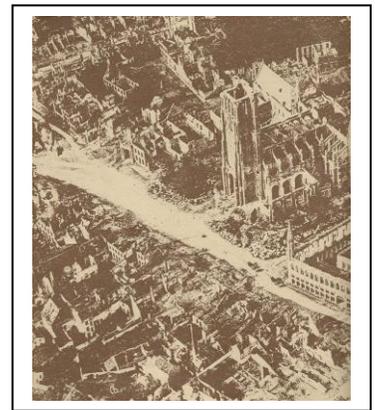
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This second 6th Canadian Field Artillery (*Howitzer*) Brigade which was to cross the Channel from England to *active service* on the Continent on January 18-19 of 1916, had been a unit of the 2nd Canadian Division. It would travel by the circuitous route – because of the port facilities necessary for its guns and other heavy equipment – from *Shorncliffe* through Southampton on the English south coast to the Canadian Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp*, established by then in the vicinity of the French industrial port-city of Le Havre situated on the estuary of the River Seine.

After a day of rest the 6th Brigade had been transported northwards from there by train to an encampment in Belgium not far-removed from the Franco-Belgian frontier where, only a single day later again, its personnel was to begin receiving instruction from the 118th Howitzer Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery whose positions the Canadian unit had then been about to inherit.

The 2nd Canadian Division – of which, as seen above, the 6th C.F.A. Brigade was an element - had already been stationed in Belgium for four months by the time of this artillery unit's arrival, *it* having landed in France in mid-September of 1915 to be immediately posted into the *Kingdom of Belgium* to an area north of Ploegsteert – where the 1st Canadian Division had by then already been serving – and south of the city of Ypres (today *Ieper*). However, a shortage of artillery had necessitated that a number of Royal Artillery formations, such as the 118th Howitzer Brigade, R.F.A., temporarily supply fire-power for the newly-arrived Division until such time as Canadian guns and personnel were to become available – much of it in the summer of 1916.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ypres, taken towards the end of 1916: it is described as the 'Ville morte'. – from Illustration*)

The 6th Canadian Field Artillery (*Howitzer*) Brigade at the time appears to have comprised three batteries (Numbers 21, 22, 23), each equipped with three of the 4.5 inch howitzer standard to the British Army*.



**A howitzer, a short-range-weapon, fired a shell high into the air and was thus able to direct plunging fire onto targets, down into trench systems and enemy gun-pits, and behind obstacles such as buildings and hills.*

(Right above: *A British-made 4.5-inch howitzer which equipped some twenty-five per cent of British and Commonwealth artillery during the Great War: It is seen here in the Royal Artillery Museum – today unfortunately closed - at the Woolwich Arsenal. – photograph from 2012(?)*)

(Right below: *Two types of six-inch calibre howitzers also used by British and Commonwealth artillery during the Great War.*

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On the left is a BL-26cwt, a gun introduced in 1915, here using a World War II carriage; right is an older six-inch 30 cwt howitzer from 1902 used throughout the Great War, although it was not a particularly successful weapon. – photographs taken at the Royal Artillery Museum at Woolwich Arsenal in 1912(?)



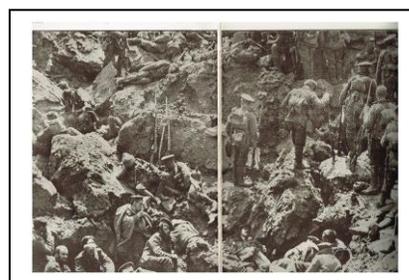
The 6th CFA Brigade War Diary suggests that it had been towards the end of the first week of February of 1916 that the personnel had concluded its instruction with the British 118th Brigade; the unit had then moved into positions from which, after having registered its guns, it had fired its first shots in anger towards the other side of the lines. For the next seven weeks further registration, harassing fire, retaliation, counter-battery fire, the destruction of enemy wire – some of this at times accomplished in co-operation with aerial observers in planes and balloons – had been some of the myriad tasks undertaken by the Numbers 21, 22 and 23 Batteries, Canadian Field Artillery.

Of course, the German artillery had been operating likewise and there were to be casualties at times incurred by the 6th Brigade – the first perhaps having been one *killed* and three *wounded* on February 15 (as well as eight horses *killed) – although, of course, the numbers were nothing to compare with those of the Canadian infantry in the trenches situated well in front of the gun-emplacements of the Canadian gunners.**

****The ‘Animals in War’ web-site cites...‘eight million horses and countless mules and donkeys’...as having died during the conflict.***

The 2nd Canadian Division was to undertake its first major infantry operation during the period of March 27, 1916, and April 17 in co-operation with British forces.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* would officially take place in the vicinity of St-Éloi, a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres. It was to be here that the British would excavate a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they had detonated on that March 27. That detonation had then been followed up by an infantry assault.



(Right above: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the area of St-Éloi – from Illustration*)

After a brief initial success the attack had soon bogged down – due to those very mine-craters which, filled with water, were to prove impassable - and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the exhausted British troops. They were to have no more success than had had the British, and by the 17th of the month, when the battle had eventually been *officially* called off, both sides were to find themselves back where they had been some three weeks previously – and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.

During this operation, of course, the 6th Canadian Field Artillery (*Howitzer*) Brigade was to play its role in supporting the efforts of the infantry of its parent unit, the 2nd Canadian Division.

Excerpt from the 6th C.F.A. Brigade War Diary for March 27, 1916: *...carried out to support the attack that the 5th Corps made on the mound at ST. ELOI...*

The 23rd Batty which was attached to 3rd Division did excellent work...

The 22nd Battalion which was allotted the task of blotting out a trench completely demolished it and was then turned onto other trenches...

21st Batty was used as a counter-batty and did good work...

According to the Appendices found in its own – admittedly biased - War Diary, the 6th Brigade had not only been successful in its given undertakings but had managed to turn its subsequent attentions to other targets in support of what at the time was the initial assault, undertaken by British forces.

The 6th Brigade had continued its support of British troops despite having been scheduled for relief on the nights of April 7-8 and 8-9, at a time when the Canadian infantry had been becoming more and more involved. And despite Canadian history citing April 17 as having been the date which marked the official end of the confrontation, it appears that no-one had bothered to consult the German guns and gunners.

After a further month of...*very active artillery...*it was not until May 16 that the 6th Brigade War Diarist would record...*enemy artillery normal...*for four successive days before finally having been able to employ the word...*quiet...*in his report of April 17.

And the 6th Brigade appears to have played its part combatting its German counterparts during all the ongoing events of this period.

On May 22 the organization of the 6th Brigade was to be changed: it was no longer to be comprised solely of howitzers but to resemble the other artillery brigades of the British and Commonwealth Field Artillery forces. There were now to be four batteries, three of them employing the British-made 18-pounder field gun, and one continuing to use the 4.5-inch howitzer. The 6th Brigade was now to incorporate the 15th, 16th and 28th Battery (18-pdrs)* and one of the original three howitzer batteries, the 22nd.



While the number of guns – at this time four - serving each battery was later to increase, these were to be the weapons with which the unit would now fight the remainder of its war.

**The trajectory of the shells fired by these guns was much flatter than that of the howitzer's fire and thus carried further. The shells – which weighed eighteen pounds - used often comprised shrapnel as opposed to high-explosive which was usually the choice of the howitzers.*

(Preceding page: A British eighteen-pounder quick-firing artillery piece, the mainstay of the British and Empire (Commonwealth) artillery forces during the Great War, here seen at the Imperial War Museum, London – photograph from 2011(?))

The next occasion on which the Canadians – by now having become the *Canadian Corps* – were to be engaged in a major operation, would be in the south-eastern sector of the *Ypres Salient*, on that part of the front for which the newly-arrived 3rd Canadian Division had taken responsibility at the end of March and beginning of April, during which time the 2nd Canadian Division had been engaged at St-Éloi.

And it was to come about at the outset of the month of that June of 1916.

From June 2 of 1916 until June 13, only some two weeks after the continued ferocious German artillery action at St-Éloi had diminished, was to be fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the surrounding areas of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the Army of the Kaiser and the Canadian Corps.

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

The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans were to deliver their offensive. They were then to overrun the forward areas and, in fact, to rupture the Canadian lines, an opportunity of which, fortunately, they had not taken advantage to exploit.

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

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

(Right below: Hill 60 as it remains a century after the events of 1916 and 1917 – when a British mine, detonated underneath, reduced its summit, and any resemblance to a hill, into very small pieces - in the area of Mount Sorrel, the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Dugouts and Maple Copse: It is kept in a preserved state – subject to the whims of Mother Nature – by the Belgian Government. – photograph from 2014)

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The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack for the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation had proved a horrendous experience: many of the intended attacks were not to go in – those that *did* go in, had gone in piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to shreds. The enemy had remained in the captured Canadian positions and the Canadians had been left to ponder an extremely heavy casualty list.

Ten days later – on the night of June 12-13 - the Canadians had again counter-attacked, on this occasion better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part had been recovered, both sides were now to be back where they had started – except for a small German gain at *Hooge* - and the cemeteries had been that much more full.



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

The 2nd Canadian Division during this time had been the one furthest removed from the scene of the German attack; thus logically it was to be the 3rd Canadian Division, on whose front the assault had fallen, and the by-then adjacent 1st Canadian Division* whose troops were to do the majority of the fighting. The units of the 2nd Canadian Division were to be less involved, although this was not always true: case in point - the first Battle Honour of the *Great War* earned by the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the 2nd Division was to be *Mount Sorrel*.

**In April of 1916, the 1st Canadian Division had been transferred from the Ploegsteert Sector on the Franco-Belgian frontier, to the area just south of Ypres. Thus the Canadians were to be stationed side by side by side – from the German point of view, the 3rd on the right, the 1st next and in the middle, then with the 2nd Canadian Division on their left flank.*

The War Diary of the newly-organized 6th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade during this eleven-day period, shows that while its Batteries had been continually active, they were usually to be engaged in retaliatory fire against an ever-dangerous German artillery program and in counter-battery work when and where the enemy guns and trench-mortars could be located.



(Right above: *Not German but - dating from the time of the Great War - comparable French trench mortars which used to stand as shown, here in the entrance to the Musée de l'Armée, Paris – photograph from 2015*)

On June 12, during the day, a ten-hour bombardment in three stages was undertaken in preparation for a counter-attack just after one o'clock on the following morning of June 13.

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The assault itself was to be preceded by a further – intense – bombardment of forty-five minutes. However, the 2nd Canadian Division was to play only a peripheral role and its artillery – including the 6th Brigade – would continue its work as described in the preceding paragraph.

The Canadian attack of June 13 was to be the final infantry action initiated by either side during the *Battle of Mount Sorrel* although both artilleries were to continue their work which had then gradually diminished in fury over the following days. By June 16 orders had been issued for the action to be taken...*In the event of the Division on our Right being attacked...and...In the event of the 6th Brigade C.F.A. being attacked...* But in fact, the events in question appear never to have come about and the priorities had soon been switched to...*Trench Mortar Retaliation*.

The summer of 1916 was to be a relatively quiet time for the Canadian Corps – perhaps it was the proverbial *calm before the storm*. The early summer was to see a number of raids undertaken by the infantry but only certain of these were to require a great amount of artillery preparation as *surprise* seems to have become a favoured tactic of the time.

The 6th Brigade and other artillery units, on the other hand, were by this time being encouraged to induce the German guns into expending ammunition uselessly by simulating activity that would invite enemy artillery action.

At the same time, the so-called *sniper gun* was now to be introduced – although exactly what that was to entail is not clear. An appendix in the Brigade's War Diary helpfully describes the use of it as an exercise which was to encourage the...*junior officer in charge of the gun to be given every opportunity to show his initiative*. A further directive limits any such *initiative*, however, to be shown with an expenditure of fewer than fifty shells per day.

An organizational change was now to come about on July 10: the Brigade would from that date be known as *King's Group* – Lieutenant Colonel King having been the current Commanding Officer of the 6th Brigade C.F.A. – and was also to have, as of that date, three batteries of Belgian artillery attached to it.

Thus had passed the first two months of the summer of 1916, with the *Canadian Corps* still occupying those same sectors of the Front in Belgium. Then had come August 27.

Excerpt from Operational Order 22 of August 24, 1916: *The units of 2nd Canadian Divisional Artillery will march from RENINGHELST Area to CASSEL Area on August 27, 1916*. The 6th Brigade was now to be withdrawn from the Belgian theatre to the 2nd Army Training Area in northern France from where, some two weeks hence, it would be transferred southwards to where the British summer offensive was currently ongoing in the French *Département de la Somme*.

As the batteries of the 6th Brigade had been retiring from the field, their places were to be taken by units of the Australian Field Artillery.

The 6th Brigade, comprising the 15th, 16th, 17th and 22nd Batteries for the transfer had begun the march to the training area at twenty-five minutes past seven in the morning of August 27 and, according to the Brigade War Diary, was to reach its first-night billets at twenty-

four minutes past mid-night. A second day of marching – also having started at twenty-five minutes past seven in the morning – had seen the training area and its billets reached later that same day.

As for the afore-mentioned...*three batteries of Belgian artillery*, the Brigade War Diarist appears to have made no further mention of them. The Belgians would not serve at *the Somme*, but would remain *in situ* in un-occupied Belgium.

The unit was to remain in northern France until the morning of September 5* when the three 18-pounder batteries had marched to the railway station in the larger centre of St-Omer from where it was to take a train to Auxi-la-Château in the Pas-de-Calais. After an overnight journey and having arrived at half-past eleven in the morning, a march to the south of some twenty kilometres had brought the 6th Brigade to the community of St-Ouen where it was to be billeted for two days.



**Apparently the Canadians had made such a good impression on the inhabitants of the place that the local mayor had turned out, accompanied by a large number of the population, to wish them well in the upcoming fight.*

(Right above: *The once-impressive railway station at St-Omer, today in sore need of revitalization, through which the 6th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, passed on August 27, 1916 – photograph from 2016*)

Eastward to Val de Maison on September 8 and onward to the large military encampment of *Brickfields* in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert on the morrow, the 6th Brigade had by that time been within both the sound - and the range - of the enemy guns. By half-past four in the afternoon of the next day all the Brigade's batteries had moved into position, having relieved Royal Field Artillery formations; the unit was ready to register its weapons, then to fire its first rounds of the *First Battle of the Somme*.

By September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which was to cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

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



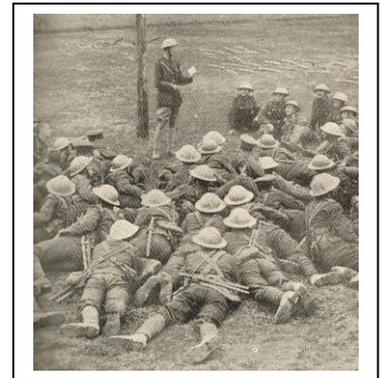
(Right above: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcellette – photograph from 2015*)

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As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be 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 and about August 30 to become part of a third general offensive.

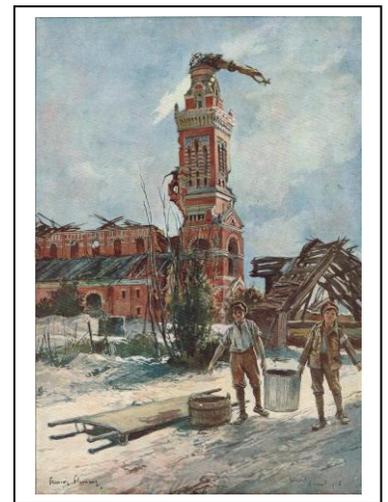
Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette.

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



Much of the following days was spent by the 6th Brigade personnel – by then re-enforced with the addition of the 13th Battery, a further 18-pounder outfit - in registering on new and varied targets in preparation for the offensive of September 15. Then...our batteries opened up on schedule at 6.20 our FOO (Forward Observation Officer) at Hdqs (Headquarters) reported our Artillery Barrage very good...at 6.26 our FOO reports infantry can be seen going over & they seem to be gaining their objective... (Excerpt from 6th Brigade War Diary entry for September 15, 1916)

(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work carrying water in Albert, the already-damaged basilica, soon to become a legend, in the background – from Illustration*)



It had been in this sector of the attack, that of the 2nd Canadian Division, that tanks* were to be used for the first time in battle and, although not yet very reliable and perhaps not very efficiently employed, they may, however, be apportioned some credit for the Canadian success of the day, an exploit which had been in contrast to the failure of the greater part of the operation. The Brigade War Diarist was to record them as ‘caterpillars’.

**Originally designated as ‘landships’, the word ‘tank’ had at first been used to mask the identity and eventual use of these massive mechanized creations.*

(Right: *One of the tanks employed during the First Battle of the Somme, here withdrawn from the field and standing in one of the ‘parks’ where these machines were overhauled and maintained – from Le Miroir*)



The 6th C.F.A. Brigade – at the time usually referred to, as mentioned above, as **King's Group** in the stream of orders arriving most days – was to play two sorts of roles: those in which it was to support infantry operations, and those in which it did not.

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The first of these typically began with a preparatory bombardment and destruction of enemy wire* which might commence days or even weeks in advance, and which could – as in the later days of the *Great War* – involve thousands of guns and the eventual unleashing of millions of projectiles, some of which are still being found today, a century later, in farmers' fields.

**Not always successful, particularly in the early years of the Great War, and often to the detriment of the infantry as occurred during the First Battle of the Somme.*

(Right above: Ploughed up in the neighbouring fields and now in an Aubervillers farm-yard, shells fired a century ago await the next visit of a French bomb-disposal team. – photograph from 2010)

(Right: Barbed-wire entanglements, these pictured in late 1917, which at that time formed part of the strong German defensive positions known as the Hindenburg Line – from Illustration)

Then, for a short period before the attack, the full fury of all the guns and trench-mortars would be brought to bear on the enemy positions. This, of course, was a two-edged sword with its obvious advantages but which also rendered the terrain to be advanced over difficult to negotiate; and, of course, when it stopped, the enemy would be aware that the attack was imminent.

Thus then came into effect the barrage fired while the infantry advanced. This in theory was the precision bombardment of enemy defensive positions in order to allow friendly infantry a relative freedom of movement to advance as close as possible to their objectives while their adversaries were taking shelter.

A refined version of the above was the creeping – or *rolling* - barrage which would bring down a first rain of shell-fire before then advancing at the supposed rate of the infantry which was following behind this curtain of fire, once again preventing the enemy from effectively manning his defences before the attackers were upon him.

As the enemy was likely to mount counter-attacks to recapture any lost property, the artillery sent observation officers forward to warn of any massing of enemy troops. The artillery had to be ready to deal with this and a system of SOS messages was developed in order to bring down immediate fire on any indicated area.

(Right: British gunners in action with their 18-pounder guns at the Somme, working in the heat of the summer of 1916 – from Illustration)



And just in case the operation in question was to prove as successful as its planners – ever-optimistic – thought it might be, the various artillery personnel were to be prepared to move the guns, and all accompanying materiel, forward in order capitalize on the pursuit of a routed enemy. This scenario was, of course, as a glance at the relevant history books shows, rarely – if ever – to be the case until 1918.

When the artillery was acting in an autonomous manner, that is to say without the infantry as its top priority, it was still busy. Counter-battery and retaliation work, as has already been seen, was an ongoing process. So was the job of interfering with his supply and re-enforcement network: railways, tram-lines, roads, tracks and cross-roads were everyday – and night – targets; with the ever-increasing use of aerial observation, dumps, communication trenches and any new construction were added to the list of things to do.

Targets of opportunity included such thing as working-parties, wiring-parties and patrols or indeed anything else that appeared to move, shine or make a noise on the other side of No Man’s Land.

And after dark began the night-firing program; as suggested above it was to interfere with his supply lines, but also, if nothing else, would ensure that a good night’s sleep was not to be enjoyed.

Registration of guns on targets, the construction and wiring of new emplacements, as well as assuring a ready supply of shells, were equally elements of the artilleryman’s lot.

During the 6th C.F.A. Brigade’s time of service at *the Somme* there was a number of artillery operations undertaken by British and Commonwealth forces, the first of which for the 2nd Canadian Division Artillery was to be the afore-mentioned attack at Courcellette and Flers.



(Right: *Seen from the north, the village of Courcellette just over a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017*)

It should here be interjected that the artillery of the 2nd Canadian Division was to serve at *the Somme* for much longer than was the Divisional infantry* which had been withdrawn at the beginning of October. Also noteworthy is that although the *official* end of *First Somme* is recorded as having occurred on November 15**, the fighting continued until early December, the 6th C.F.A. Brigade – *King’s Group* – not having retired from the theatre until November 28.



**Difficult though the life of a artilleryman may have been, it was likely not to be compared to that of the soldier in the forward trenches. Anyone who is not convinced of this is encouraged to compare the casualty lists. Thus artillery personnel – although certainly relieved at intervals – were often to spend longer periods serving the guns than the infantry would manning the trenches.*

(Previous page: *Wounded soldiers at the Somme being evacuated to the rear area in hand-carts – from Le Miroir*)

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

****November 15, 1916, was the date on which troops of the 51st Highland Division finally captured the village of Beaumont – one of the two communities comprising the Commune of Beaumont-Hamel – which had been one of the objectives of the first day's fighting almost twenty weeks before, on July 1.**



Thus *King's Group* would support the infantry assaults of September 15-16, October 1-2, October 8-12, October 21, November 10-11, November 13, and of November 18. Then on November 24, it had begun to hand over its guns to a relieving force of the Royal Field Artillery and to prepare for its retirement from *the Somme*.

The march away from the battle was to begin at ten minutes to seven in the morning of November 28 of that 1916. The column apparently would make good time, travelling at first to the westward, then northward to circumvent Arras, before having reached its destination four days, on the evening of December 1. This final stop had been in the area of Bruay, some thirty kilometres to the north-west of the aforementioned medieval – and by this time, battered - city of Arras.

By December 3, the Canadians of the 6th Brigade were relieving the British batteries of the Lahore Artillery Brigade* which was to be left behind when the Lahore Division of the Indian Army had left France in 1915 to serve in Mesopotamia and to escape another northern European winter.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916. – from Illustration*)



***This would have been a Royal Artillery formation as the artillery of the Indian Army had been supplied by British personnel almost immediately following the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857 – and one infantry battalion in four was also British. It also just happened that the last Canadian divisions – particularly the 3^d and 4th - were short on artillery when they came into active service on the Continent, thus the Royal Artillery brigades of the Indian Army were seconded to the Canadians.**

The winter of 1916-1917, as was to be the case during all the winters of the *Great War*, would be one of the everyday business of life in - and out of - the trenches. There was to be little - if any - concerted infantry activity apart from the constant patrolling and the occasional raiding by both sides.

(continued)

This latter activity had been encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which would also serve to keep the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who had been ordered to carry them out in general apparently would grow to loathe these operations.

However, the number of raids was to hardly necessitate artillery support for the infantry on the scale of what it had been at *First Somme*. In any case, the harsh winter was now to make things difficult in other ways, not only for the personnel but for the Brigade's animals (see further below).

There had of course been the daily trickle of casualties, for the most part due to the enemy's artillery and to his snipers. To this should be added, it ought not to be forgotten, the daily count of those sick - plus a surprising number of others in need of dental work – which had also helped to keep the field ambulances and the casualty clearing stations busy during this period.



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

The early weeks of the New Year, 1917, were to be a time when the various batteries and brigades had been ordered to take stock of their equipment and to report any deficiencies or inadequacies to the appropriate authorities. The care of the horses and mules of an artillery unit was, of course, a priority, and in that particular winter there had been a shortage of fodder*, worrisome because in winter more energy, thus food, is required by the animals to labour over soft and muddy roads. Many of these animals had reportedly been in poor condition.

**There was also a shortage of heating fuel, notably coal, and both men and animals, quite often wet as a result of working in what were generally foul conditions all that winter, were often quartered in locations which were poorly-heated – if at all.*

Various personnel had left the 6th Brigade in this period to be replaced by newcomers, some of them novices to the practical problems of the *Western Front* – and not just those presented by enemy activity. This was to be a cold, wet winter, and a cold, wet winter was a time when the daily sick-parades were to be longer than at other times of the year.

During January the Brigade had found itself serving in the *Angres Sector*, just to the west of Liévin, a community adjacent to the larger city and mining centre of Lens.

In the *Angres Sector* there was to be little other than the daily routine to report and at the end of the month the unit had been withdrawn and had marched north-westward to the vicinity of Barlin and Camblain-Chatelain from where it had then proceeded, days later, to the area of Burbure, a further fifteen kilometres to the northwest and westward from the historic town of Béthune. There, some two weeks of training and the inevitable accompanying inspections would await the Brigade.



(Preceding page: *The Douai Plain as seen from the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge on a rise identified since that time as Hill 145: a mourning Canada looks eastward, grieving her lost children. – photograph from 2015*)

Whether or not the 6th Brigade's next posting was chosen with a certain foresight has not been recorded. It was a return to action in the vicinity of the village of Thélus, almost at the southern limit of the Canadian sectors of responsibility. This was an area where the land sloped upwards from south to north, to culminate on a crest of land which dominated the *Douai Plain*, both the crest and the plain occupied by the Germans at that time. In French *la crête de Vimy*, it is known better to English-speaking Canadians as *Vimy Ridge*.



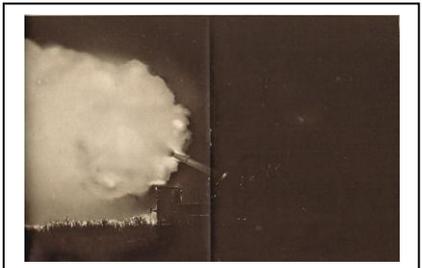
(Right above: *The same Memorial as seen from the German side of the front, from the area of the village of La Chaudière – photograph from 2015*)

It appears that the 6th Brigade was then soon to be occupying the positions at not far-distant La Targette – also known at the time as *Aux-Rietz* - from which it would fire its opening rounds on Easter Monday, April 9, in the *Battle of Arras* (see below). Much of the unit's time spent there during the last of that month of March and the first week of April had therefore been spent amassing materiel – perhaps not least of all munitions for the coming fight: fifteen-hundred rounds per 18-pounder gun and thirteen-hundred per howitzer*. The Brigade personnel had even been called upon to lay a light railway track to facilitate this task.

**At the same time the individual batteries were being brought up from a strength of four guns to six.*

As these final days had passed, the preparatory artillery barrage, having commenced of April 2, was to grow progressively heavier; on April 6, Good Friday, the War Diarist of one of the infantry battalions would describe it as...*drums**.

By this time, of course, the Germans had been well aware that something was in the offing and their guns in their turn were to be throwing retaliatory fire (although see further below) onto the Canadian positions - and their aircraft had been constantly busy overhead.



(Right: *A heavy British artillery piece continues its deadly work during a night before the attack on Vimy Ridge. – from Illustration*)

**It should be said that a great deal of the artillery used in the assault on Vimy Ridge was British and that British infantry also participated. Almost fifty per cent of the personnel which had been employed to prepare for that day were British, not to mention the men whose contribution – such as those who had dug the tunnels - allowed for it all to happen.*

(continued)

On April 9 of 1917 the British Army had 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 count of casualties, some four thousand per day, the *Battle of Arras* was to be the most expensive operation of the *Great War* for the British, one of the few positive episodes having been the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.

While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, that French offensive of *le Chemin des Dames* would be yet a further disaster.



(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial* which, since 1936, has stood 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 – and with a British infantry brigade operating under 2nd Canadian Division command – had stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

The Canadian 3rd and 4th Divisions had been issued the responsibility for the capture of the *Ridge* itself; to their immediate right was to be the 2nd Canadian Division, attacking in the area of the village of *Thélus* on the southern slope; and to the right again the 1st Canadian Division had been ordered to clear the area lower down the slope towards the village of *Roclincourt*.

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)



The role of the artillery on that day had been a critical factor in the success of the operation but it was to be difficult to continue in the same vein*. During the next few days the weather made life miserable, particularly perhaps for those artillery personnel who were to be endeavouring to manoeuvre their weapons forward and to bring heavily-laden ammunition wagons up to support them. Most of the time it had been very difficult: on some days it had proved to be impossible.

**To the artillery barrage had now been added the machine-gun barrage. Such was the quality of the British Vickers medium machine-that the only problem with a single weapon firing thirty-thousand rounds was acquiring the necessary ammunition.*

(continued)

The 6th Brigade had played its role in the days prior to the attack not only in the general bombardment but also in wire-cutting by the 18-pounders and in the destruction of the opposing trench lines by the howitzers. The village of Thélus was to be methodically reduced to rubble by the unit and by others in order to prevent its use as a strong-point.

What appears to have surprised the Brigade War Diarist had been the paucity of the German response which at times would be surprisingly light. In fact during the preparatory bombardment...*The weak retaliation of the enemy during the last three days was almost uncanny. Our batteries expected to have a very warm time in La Targette but only a few odd shells have been dropped there to date.* (Excerpt from 6th C.F.A. Brigade War Diary entry for April 5, 1917)

The feeble response by the German artillery – normally active and all-too efficient – was also to be a feature of the fighting on April 9. The opening barrage at five-thirty in the morning of April 9 had not been greeted by the furious riposte that might have been expected and this lethargic performance was to continue throughout the day. The objectives of the infantry attack had almost all been taken on time and often after having faced an unusually lacklustre German defence*.

**It has more recently been surmised that Vimy Ridge was not the natural fortress that had been supposed. Having realized this, the Germans had apparently prepared new positions in what had been their third line of defence, some three kilometres distant, in the expectation that the Ridge would fall.*



(Right above: *Canadian troops and German prisoners organize the evacuation of wounded of both sides from Vimy Ridge on a light railway still being constructed by Pioneer troops following close behind the attacking infantry. – from Illustration*)

For the 6th Brigade the afternoon of April 9 must have seemed almost anti-climactic: *The Brigade fired several times during the afternoon and twice during the night on reports of enemy infantry reinforcing their line along the Lens-Arras Railway Line.*

The Operation was a tremendous success each step being taken at the time ordered. The Field Artillery's part was undoubtedly an important one, the harassing fire day and night before the battle and the rolling barrage covering the attacking Infantry. (Excerpts from the 6th C.F.A. Brigade War Diary entry for April 9, 1917)

As has been seen in a previous paragraph, even had there been orders to pursue the enemy – the directives had instead been...*to consolidate* – it is unlikely that these orders could have been followed since the weather had been atrocious. Even having spent all of April 11 in an attempt to advance its guns, the 6th Brigade had shifted only a small number of them and these were not registered. Even so, after their efforts of the day, many of the unit's men and horses had been reported as in a state of exhaustion*, the Brigade to have lost twenty animals which had reportedly...*died from fatigue.*

Thus the *Battle of Arras* was to settle back into the pattern of static trench warfare.

**It was to require the power of one-hundred fifty men of the 22nd Canadian Infantry Battalion seconded for the occasion on the following day to move only a few more guns into an advanced position.*

There were to be further infantry attacks and counter-attacks during the weeks that followed, costly affairs such as at Arleux-en-Gohelle and Frésnoy during which the Canadians were to incur more casualties than they had done during the taking of *Vimy Ridge* - but without the same results. The War Diary of the 6th Brigade, however, while showing the unit to have been perhaps more than normally active during this period, does not appear to show the unit as having supported the foot soldiers to any great extent.

Instead it was to be occupied in countering a rejuvenated German artillery which had again begun to show its tenacity and expertise, as witnessed by a number of Canadian guns having been destroyed or put out of action – with the aid of aerial spotting – and, as well, an above-the-average casualty count.

This activity was to diminish during the second week of May, on the 15th day of which the *Battle of Arras* had *officially* come to an end. During the next ten weeks the majority of the Canadian infantry formations were to be withdrawn from the forward area for prolonged periods of rest and often recreation – which would have been in addition to the inevitable training, re-enforcement and re-organization.



(Right above: 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: The use of the head-band to facilitate carrying had by that time been adopted from the indigenous peoples of North America – from Le Miroir)

As for the Canadian artillery, it had remained much *in situ* during this period. However, it had adopted the practice - when its personnel was to be relieved – of relinquishing its weapons to the artillerymen who were arriving to relieve them. During the *Great War*, where mobility was not to count for much during some ninety per cent of the time and the guns would remain where they were for lengthy periods, it was a practice which made a great deal of sense.

While many of the British troops would soon be on their way northward into Belgium to play their part in the upcoming British campaign of that summer of 1917, the Canadians at that time were to remain in much the same sectors to be found between Arras and Béthune. There they were soon, at least initially, to be undertaking offensive operations of their own.



(Right above: Canadian troops in the forward area in a sector close to Lens during the late spring or early summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir)

(continued)

These confrontations had been intended, at least partially, to divert German attention - as well his reserves - from the area of the *Ypres Salient* where the British offensive was to run its course. Nevertheless, they did have some merit of their own:

The area around Lens had been the only major coal-producing area of France but, of course, not only had it been partially occupied by the Germans who were also using some of this resource, but the capacity to produce the coal necessary for the French war effort had been reduced to some forty per cent of its pre-War tonnage.



Thus the Canadian efforts, if successful, would regain at least some of that capacity.

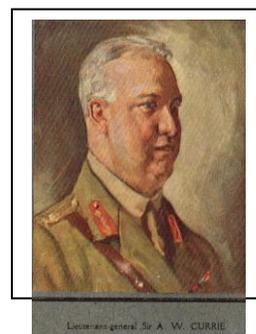
(Right above: *Yet a further example of the conditions under which the soldiers of both sides were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)

One of the primary objectives of this Canadian campaign was to be the so-named *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of that mining-centre and city of Lens.



(Right: *Canadian troops advancing under fire 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 had been 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 more important than that of the city of Lens itself.

(Right above: *The portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie is from Illustration.*)

Objectives had been limited and were for the most part to be achieved by the end of the first day, August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it had been expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it had proved; on the 16th several strong counter-attacks had been launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.



(continued)

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

These defences had held and the Canadian artillery, which was to be employing newly-developed procedures (see immediately below), had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* would remain in Canadian hands.

The attack on *Hill 70* had been undertaken by the infantry battalions of the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions and thus the 6th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade was to be working directly in their support. During the days preceding the operation it had undertaken counter-battery work and wire-cutting. But it had also practised on a program conceived to deal with enemy counter-attacks and had registered on areas suitable for the amassing of enemy troops to be used for that purpose.

In the event of a German counter-attack, the threatened infantry was to send up SOS signals which would identify the sector likely to be attacked and the artillery would act accordingly. Moreover, barrages had been planned not only to protect the Canadian infantry during its advance but also, if the enemy forces had not been deterred during their period of assembly prior to their retaliatory assault, to provide a curtain of fire to eliminate any counter-attack in progress.



On August 15, and on the days following, these procedures had been used to such good effect that, as seen above, none of the ground captured during the operation at *Hill 70* would subsequently be lost back to the enemy.

(Right above: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector during the summer of 1917, being prepared for action by its crew from the Canadian Garrison Artillery – from *Le Miroir)**



(Right: *Canadians soldiers in the captured rear area of Hill 70 during the days after the battle – from *Le Miroir)**

This Canadian-led campaign - which had included the above-described attack on *Hill 70* - had apparently been expected to continue into September and even longer, but the ongoing – since the last day of July - British summer offensive in Belgium had been proceeding less well than anticipated and the British High Command had been starting to look for reinforcements to make good the by-then exorbitant losses.

The Australians – stationed further to the south than the Canadians – the New Zealanders* and then the Canadians themselves had thus been ordered to prepare to move north. The Canadian Corps had been obliged to abandon its plans.

****The Australians and the New Zealanders, originally collectively known as the Anzacs, by this time were two independent forces.***

There were therefore to be no further major Canadian-inspired operations in the Lens-Béthune sectors and the troops yet again would settle back into that monotonous but off-times precarious existence of life in – and behind – the forward area. On most days, according to the Brigade War Diary, it was to be the artillery which was to fight it out – but, of course, the infantry would often be the recipient of whatever had been on offer.



(Right above: *Canadian artillery troops manhandling a gun into position ‘somewhere in Flanders’ during Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

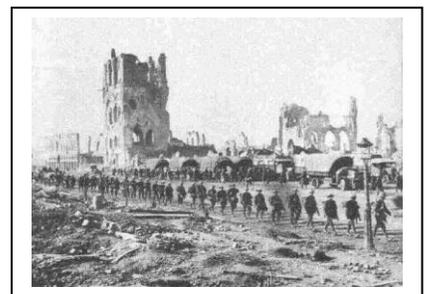
Even though it had become known that the Canadians were to be eventually transferred north into Belgium, for the *Canadian Corps* there nonetheless was now to be a nine-week interlude between the action at *Hill 70* and the transfer to its next theatre of operations. During this time the daily grind of life in the trenches had still been the rule - with several exceptions when the unit had been retired to areas behind the lines, particularly for training. But, also during this time, in the rear areas it was becoming apparent - this impression, as often, gleaned from various War Diary entries - that sports were now being considered more and more to be a morale booster*.

**Although, according to the War Diary of the 6th Brigade, the unit was not spared much time from forward area duties during these weeks to display any athletic prowess that the unit may have harboured.*

It was not to be until October 17 that the first batteries of the 6th Brigade had been relieved and, two days afterwards, that this relief had been completed, the unit's guns apparently to be left, as was the practice, with the relieving force. Four more days of preparation were then to pass before, on October 23, the first stage in the unit's transfer had been undertaken – on this day northwards to *Gonnehem*. The march – by both men and horses – had continued on the next three days with the 6th Brigade to pass via *Morbeque* and *Godwærsvelde* before having arrived at *Vlamertinghe*, just west of *Ypres*, on October 26.

By this time of course, and as seen above, the entire *Canadian Corps* had been ordered north into Belgium and once more to the *Ypres Salient* from where it had departed en route to *the Somme* some fourteen months before.

Officially designated as the *Third Battle of Ypres*, the campaign – ongoing since the last day of that July – was to come to be known to history as *Passchendaele*, having adopted the name of a small village on a ridge that had been – at least latterly *professed* to have been - one of the British Army's main 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*)

(continued)

From the time that the Canadians had entered the fray, it was they who were to shoulder a great deal of the burden. For the week of October 26 until November 3 it was to be the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions which would spearhead the assault, with the 1st and 2nd Divisions in reserve.

From November 5 until the *official* end of the affair – November 10 (other sources cite other dates) - the reverse was to be true with troops of the 2nd Canadian Division having finally entered the remnants of the village of Passchendaele itself.

(Right: *Somewhere, possibly anywhere or almost everywhere, on the battlefield of Passchendaele during the autumn of 1917 – from Illustration*)



(Right below: *The monument to the sacrifice of the Canadians which stands in the south-western outskirts of the re-constructed village of Passchendaele (today Passendale) – photograph from 2010*)

On October 27, the next day, orders had been received to relieve British divisional artillery units in the field in the area of Zonnebeke from where the second phase of the Canadian-led operation was now to begin. The relief had subsequently taken place on the following day again, having been rendered more difficult by the heavy enemy shelling which had welcomed the new arrivals, and further difficulties had been encountered since a number of the guns allotted to the Canadians had been found to be inoperable.

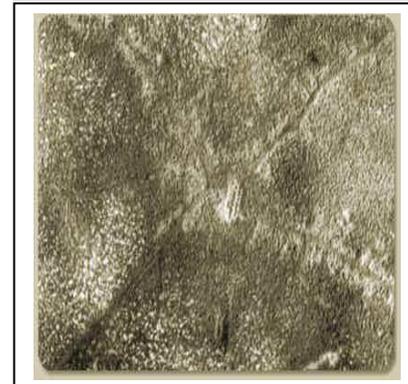


Preparations for the offensive had continued on the morrow with ammunition supplies having been replenished and with replacement guns provided. Quantities of those munitions had been expended almost immediately in practice barrages and harassing fire; thus, that provision of shells was to place an extra burden on the horses, donkeys and mules which would be obliged to carry it up to the forward area in packs through the mud and in the face of enemy shell-fire. The wretched animals had once more lost heavily.

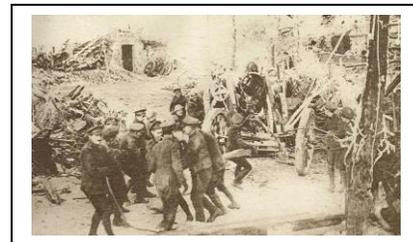


(Right above: *The village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1916, after two years of war – from Illustration*)

The infantry attack had gone in at ten minutes to six on the morning of October 30, the guns of the 6th C.F.A. Brigade having played their part in the supporting barrage. The same procedures as at *Hill 70* in mid-August were now to be employed when and where the Germans had attempted to counter-attack and would apparently be just as effective on this second occasion.



On the afternoon of October 31, excerpts of the War Diarist's entry for the day reads: *Line now runs along western outskirts of Paschendaele (sic)...Preparations now commence for 3rd Phase of Canadian attack...More ammunition rushed up...Enemy shelling very intense all day...All the evening counter attacks driven off...Casualties 1 O.R. Killed & 11 O.Rs Wounded...*



(Right above: *The vestiges, few and far between, of the once-village of Passchendaele as seen from the air in 1917, after the battle of that name – from Illustration*)

(Right above: *A Canadian howitzer being man-handled into place during Passchendaele – from Le Miroir*)

While the official end to *Passchendaele* is cited in many sources – but not in all - as having been November 10, 1917, and while the large majority of the Canadian infantry battalions were to have retired from Belgium by that date or very soon afterwards, the Canadian guns had tarried a while longer.



(Right above: *Just a few hundred to the south-west of Passchendaele – and looking in the opposite direction from the site of the monument pictured on the previous page – this ground lies in the direction of Zonnebeke – a kilometre or so away – and is part of the slope up which the Canadians were to fight during the last days of the battle. – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *In the stone of the Menin Gate at Ypres (today Ieper) there are carved the names of British and Empire (Commonwealth) troops who fell in the Ypres Salient during the Great War and who have no known last resting-place. There are almost fifty-five thousand remembered there; nevertheless, so great was the final number, that it was to be necessary to commemorate those who died after August 16 of 1917, just fewer than thirty-five thousand, on the Tyne Cot Memorial. – photograph from 2010*)



The 6th C.F.A. Brigade would withdraw from the field back to its waggon lines on November 23, and from the country back to France on the morrow. Its orders had been to relieve a unit of the 4th Canadian Divisional Artillery in the *Méricourt Sector* in France by November 30...*practically on the same front as we covered before proceeding North.*

During those final twenty-three days of its posting into the *Ypres Salient* the 6th C.F.A. Brigade had participated in the next, and final, drive - past Passchendaele and to the top of the *Ridge* - in much the same manner as it had on October 30-31. There was perhaps to be only a single incident of novelty during those final days of the battle, that having been the addition of machine-guns to the Brigade strength. Enemy air-craft had by then been playing a major part in the bombing and strafing of Canadian positions, so much so that it had been decided to provide anti-aircraft protection to the artillery units*.

**By this time in the Great War, the machine-gun was playing a major role in Canadian operations, apparently much more so than it was in the British forces, the number of these weapons used – per unit - by the Canadians some fifty per cent greater.*

By November 28 the 6th CFA Brigade and its animals had covered the seventy kilometres – on foot and on hoof - from the area of Ypres to that of La Targette, not far distant from *Vimy Ridge*, to the vicinity of which the unit was now to be posted. By the deadline date of November 30, gun registering had been undertaken, retaliation plans and SOS schemes had been in place, and a re-enforcement draft of thirty-five horses and fifteen mules had been received.



(Right above: *Two military cemeteries at La Targette – formerly Aux Rietz: The nearer British one is the last resting-place for six-hundred forty-one war dead; the larger French one behind is that of some eleven thousand. Within a German burial ground only a kilometre distant lie forty-five thousand.* – photograph from 2014)

It was now December, and that month of the year of 1917 was to hold a special interest for the Canadian Forces serving overseas: the Canadian National Election.

From the first day of the month until the seventeenth, Canadian militia personnel were to vote. The 6th C.F.A. Brigade's journal records the event in the entry of December 9, and while the Diarist has not noted the numbers having cast a vote, in most other units the number of participants was to reach and at times even surpass ninety per cent. At the same time the soldiery had been encouraged to purchase *Government War Bonds* which thus was to allow the troops to not only *fight* in the conflict but to also directly help to *pay* for it as well. Even so, the War Diary has gone on to document that the vast majority of the votes had been in favour of the incumbent Union Government.

And it had been, as reported on a previous page, that Driver Wooden, on December 10, 1917, the day after that vote, had reported from the 3rd Divisional Train *to duty* with the 6th Canadian Field Artillery Brigade.

* * * * *

Driver Wooden's unit continued to man its guns until December 21-22 when it was relieved. From La Targette it was to retire, commencing at nine o'clock in the morning of the following day, some forty kilometres to the north-west, to the vicinity of the community of Amettes where, having trekked over a route via the communities of Mont St-Éloi, Houdain, Divion and Ferfay...*March was finished in clear moon-light. Arrived about 5.30 am.* It had been a long day.

Apparently, according to our War Diarist source, the Christmas period was a great success. It was also a prolonged affair as the batteries were to have their dinners on successive evenings – more or less – and it was not to be until the evening of New Year's Day that the final battery dinner was consumed. It appears, however, that the festivities continued: a dinner for infantry officers on January 3; two concerts for all on January 4; football games – the round ball – on January 5; and church parades on January 6.

(Right below: *Canadian soldiers stand in front of a temporary theatre and peruse the attractions of an upcoming concert. – from Le Miroir*)

On January 7 the War Diarist has noted in the day's entry that...*Nothing of importance happened today.*

More football and church parades then ensued, during which time orders were received, on January 14, to the effect that the 6th Brigade would return to the same forward area whence it had been withdrawn on January 18, four weeks or so earlier.



The duties of the Brigade during the weeks that followed were to differ little from those that had preceded the Christmas respite. The *little* in question comprised the salvage of abandoned and discarded ammunition, some five to six thousand rounds; the cultivation of wasteland...*by all units...*in the nearby area where, by February 3, ploughing had apparently already commenced; and the conclusion of equipping all batteries with anti-aircraft machine-gun protection.

On February 23, after the Brigade's retirement to rest in the area of Méricourt, it appears that the role of the unit was to change: having been for so long a component of the 2nd Divisional Artillery, the...*Brigade is to form reserve for first army to be ready to move into the line at any point...* (Excerpt from 6th Brigade War Diary entry for February 23, 1918) – a sort of Emergency Response team, perhaps with a view as to what was being feared by the High Command might soon be happening...

...as it soon was.

Driver Wooden and his 6th Brigade continued their training – some of it in the concepts of *open warfare*, something new indeed - into the month of March in the area of Marles-les-Mines. By the twelfth day of the month the Brigade personnel was playing football again to which by this time had been added baseball, and by the fifteenth day of the month the unit was back in firing positions at Liévin, just to west of Lens.

Then arrived March 21, the first day of spring of 1918.

(Right: *While the Germans did not attack Lens – some sources say that this is neighbouring Liévin - in the spring of 1918, they bombarded it very 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*)



Perhaps not many people realize how close the Germans were to come 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 enemy launched a massive attack, Operation '*Michael*', on March 21.

(continued)

The main blow was to fall at *the Somme* in the area of, and also just to the south of, the battlefields of 1916, and it was to descend for the most part on the British Fifth Army stationed there, particularly where its forces were serving adjacent to French units.

The German advance had continued for some two weeks, petering out just in front of the city of Amiens. The ultimate failure of the offensive was a result of a combination of factors, British and Commonwealth resistance, German fatigue and logistical problems, and French co-operation with the British the most significant.

**A second but lesser such offensive, 'Georgette', was to fall 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 to be successful for a while, but petered out at the end of the month.*



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

**The area just to the south and west of Arras was at the northern extreme of the German offensive. Unsure as to what the enemy's intentions were, the High Command moved the 2nd Canadian Division into the area to forestall any attack if and when it occurred to protect the avenue to the Channel ports and also the coal-fields in the area of Béthune.*



In the event, the offensive in that direction was stopped cold by the British Third Army before it reached Arras, but during the period of the crisis the Germans had stayed active enough to keep the British and Canadians wondering.

As for the situation to the north, it apparently was never deemed serious enough to warrant any Canadian movement in that direction.

(Right above: *The City Hall of Arras and its clock-tower in 1919 after some four years of bombardment by German artillery – from a vintage post-card*)

In contrast to many of the War Diaries of divers Canadian units at this time, that of the 6th CFA Brigade appears has recorded the crisis as of the first day. Its author writes: *Bosche started his long talked of offensive on the Somme today. Result is eagerly awaited... **

By the next day the German offensive was to have some immediate consequences for the 6th C.F.A. Brigade and Driver Wooden: *Orders received this afternoon to move south and relieve the 62nd Brigade R.F.A. at Willerval. They go south to take part in battle against new Hun offensive. We are relieved in the afternoon by the 5th C.D.A. (Canadian Divisional Artillery) and are to move in the morning.*

Having moved off at nine o'clock on the morrow morn, however, Driver Wooden's unit received new orders to *stand to* and await further directives; the Brigade appears to have continued *standing to* until after seven o'clock in the morning of March 29 at which time it was ordered to positions in the area of Basseux and Blairville, to the south-west of Arras.

There had been expectations of an attack but a heavy enemy bombardment in another sector to the south appears to have been the extent of it.

Adjacent to the east of Blairville is the farming village of Ficheux and the surrounding commune which bears the same name. It was now at Ficheux that Driver Wooden and his comrades-in-arms of the 6th C.F.A. Brigade were to be posted for the following fourteen weeks, until July 6. While at the outset of this period, at the end of March and in early April, there was a great deal of German artillery activity to counter, there was not to be any infantry action fought - for reasons cited further above - and, as the days passed, so did the enemy threat.

The calm which by late April was descending on the recent battlefields was perhaps not particularly surprising*: both sides had reached exhaustion and now needed time to once more re-organize and – less and less feasible during these later years of the war – to re-enforce.

**And the Germans were also busy elsewhere on the Western Front; the offensives launched against British and Commonwealth forces were not the only battles to be fought. During this period Ludendorff, up until late spring, also attacked the French.*

The Allies (French and British and Commonwealth) from this point of view were to be a lot better off than their German adversaries – they had had two empires to draw from and the Americans had been belatedly arriving on the scene.

The arrival of those aforementioned troops from the Russian Front was to represent the final substantial reserves available to the German High Command. On the other hand, as seen above, their adversaries would soon see not only a superiority but a supremacy in numbers. It was to be only a matter of time.



On March 26 an overall Allied Commander-in-Chief had been appointed, Foch, and he was soon to be setting about organizing – although some historians would be unhappy about the term - a counter-offensive. Thus the front was to remain quiet – until the second week in August.

(Right above: *Le Maréchal Ferdinand Jean-Marie Foch, this photograph from 1921, became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies on March 26, 1918. – photograph from the Wikipedia web-site*)

From time to time, of course, that relative calm would be punctuated by local infantry operations, apart from the eternal – so it must have seemed – patrolling; raids by both sides still would at times be undertaken and these often were to require artillery co-operation. But this was now the exception, not the rule.

If anything, for the 6th Brigade, days following that long posting to Ficheux would be even calmer than what had gone before. The period of July 6 to 15 was spent at Magnicourt, well away from the forward area, in training and in sports; then, after a false alarm that it was to again go into action, the unit found itself in reserve once more.

This was in the area of Savy, north-west of Arras where it would remain until July 24, before finally having been ordered to return to Magnicourt to await the penultimate day of the month, July 30.

That period of calm, nevertheless, was now about to change: abruptly.

That change began at midnight of July 30-31 when the 6th C.F.A. Brigade began to march towards the south. At fifteen minutes before five o'clock in the morning of July 31 the unit reached the community of Orville where it spent the next day. That night was to be even more tiring, a further march of eight hours duration – from nine in the evening until five the next morning - taking the Brigade on as far as St-Sauveur. The 6th Brigade War Diarist now takes up the story:

August 1/18 - ...From all appearances it looks as if there is something on a big scale pending. The concentration of troops in the vicinity, the long night marches and the absolute secrecy of it all, does not predict picnic-times for the hun in the near future. Many Australians and New Zealanders in the vicinity...

The next two nights were spent at St-Sauveur to allow the tired Brigade personnel and animals to rest. Apparently the nearby canal and the warm weather combined to allow several hours of recreation during these hours.

The march continued on the evening of August 3. Then...*Leaving ST. SAUVEUR at 9.45 we passed through Amiens about midnight. This city, perhaps one of the finest in Picardy is a veritable "city of the dead". The guns and limbers rumbled over its cobbled streets and a hollow lifeless echo resounded from its tenantless houses. Here and there one saw a traffic control or military policeman, the town's only occupants...*



(Right above: *The venerable gothic cathedral in the city of Amiens which the leading German troops had been able to see on the western skyline in the spring of 1918 – photograph from 2007(?)*)

This march of the night of August 3-4 continued until one o'clock in the morning when Driver Wooden's unit arrived in the vicinity of Longeau to...*tie its horses and vehicles in the trees and groves in the vicinity.*

In his journal entry of August 4, its War Diarist officer-author re-iterates the theme of secrecy: *The greatest secrecy must be observed. No movement is allowed during daylight except that absolutely necessary.*

At this time almost the entire *Canadian Corps* had been on the move in a semi-circular itinerary to the west of Amiens, then south, then east again to finish moving forward in front of the city towards the intended theatre of the upcoming offensive to the east of the city of Amiens.

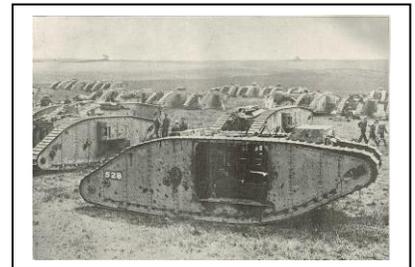
(continued)

Whereas the first part of the transfer by the Canadian Corps – an exception had been the 6th Brigade C.F.A. - would be undertaken mostly by train or motorized transport, the latter part was to be undertaken on foot and by night, as has been seen above, out of sight of any German aerial observers.

The Brigade War Diarist now records in the same entry, that of August 4, the priority which had to be given to the acquisition of ammunition for the guns, without which, of course, they would have been useless: *Ammunition to the amount of 600 rounds per gun is to be dumped at gun positions...The work of getting up this amount of ammunition started tonight and must be completed before ZERO hour.*

As cited above, each morning at the approach of daylight, movement ceased and all work was hidden from the observant eyes of any German aviator. The area chosen for the offensive – that facing the Germans at the furthest point of their advance four months earlier during the spring offensive was - and today is still - well forested, providing the necessary cover. During the night of August 5-6...*Ammunition dumps at guns were completed tonight and guns taken forward but were left under cover in Bois d'Aquense (sic). These guns are to be taken forward tomorrow night and put into action in battle positions.*

The day of the attack was to be August 8. Thus on the night of August 7-8, Driver Wooden's 6th CFA Brigade was moved forward. It was not alone: *Guns were brought forward into battle positions and Bde. H.Q. moved forward... Zero hour is set for 4.20 am. tomorrow. Tanks and cavalry are to co-operate. Everything is in readiness for the big show. The 5th Bde are to advance in close support of the infantry and the 6th are to follow as soon as barrage is completed.*



(Right above: *In 1917 the British formed the Tank Corps, a force which was to become ever stronger in 1918 as evidenced by this photograph of a tank park, once again 'somewhere in France'. – from Illustration*)

Thus by the early morning of August 8, 1918, the stage was set for the *Battle of Amiens* and the British, Canadian, Australian, French and American attackers were now poised and ready. The only ones *not* to be prepared were the German troops facing them.

At 4.20 am the barrage came down with a crash and started rolling forward, followed by our infantry. The hun was taken by surprize and his retaliation was weak and slow coming down... The guns in action were pouring out their rolling barrage while the mobile brigade was disappearing into the mist over the crest. Huge tanks lumbered over the open ground at an incredible speed, lurched across trenches and shell holes and they too disappeared into the steady stream forward... The support infantry in detached parties marched coolly ahead to follow up the success of the attacking battalions... Then the rest of the artillery, their barrage completed, hooked up and started forward...

(continued)

We are not given to know Driver Wooden's precise role during the advance of August 8, but it may well have been, as a driver, that this was the moment in which he played a vital part, as the guns of the 6th Brigade were moved rapidly ahead to support the still-advancing infantry.

That morning of August 8 had been particularly misty and during the early hours there was to be a great deal of confusion even though the opposition had been relatively disorganized and feeble. However, as the morning progressed, so the ground-fog dissipated and the advance gathered momentum; in fact, the artillery was often to report problems in keeping up with the foot-soldiers who, on the Canadian Front, were to have moved forward an impressive eleven kilometres by the end of the day. After almost four years of fighting for only a few metres of ground, mobility had once again entered into the equation.

According to the War Diarist, the personnel of the 6th Brigade were to rest satisfied that night after...*a good day's work but dog-tired. The attack is to go on again tomorrow.*

And go on it did, but never with quite the same success as that of the first day: German resistance, perhaps not too surprisingly, was to become more resolute; the number of tanks now available, for a number of reasons, was to diminish considerably and the Germans were quickly learning how to deal with them; and the advance of the British on the left on August 8, with fewer tanks in support and over more difficult ground, as it was also with that of the French on the right flank, had not been as great as that of the Canadians and Australians in the centre.



(Right above: *Canadian and German wounded from the first days of the battle – some cases more serious than others - waiting to be evacuated to the rear – from Le Miroir*)



(Right above: *The caption records this as being a photograph of German prisoners taken by the Canadians, some of them carrying a wounded officer – Allied or German officer is not documented. Also to be noted is one of the newer tanks. – from Le Miroir*)

Although the advance was thus slowed, it nevertheless continued until August 11 when further attacks were postponed and the Brigade's forward batteries were recalled slightly.

Driver Wooden's unit – and the *Canadian Corps* - were now to remain *in situ* for the next number of days during which time the news was received that the next advance would be undertaken at the earliest on August 16.



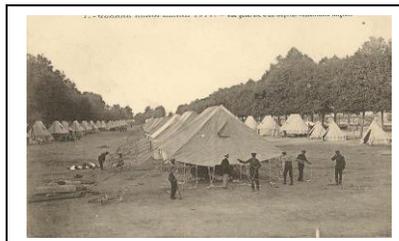
(Right: *French dead in the communal cemetery at Caix, just to the west of Rosières, the French having relieved Canadian troops towards the end of the second week of the battle: Caix also hosts a British Commonwealth cemetery as well as a German burial ground. – photograph from 2017*)

As it transpired, it was to be on August 16 and 17 that the different batteries of the 6th CFA Brigade were withdrawn to the area of Ignaucourt which had been captured on the first day of the battle. The War Diary entry of that August 17 reports nothing other than the completion of that relief operation and that there were the remains of a German gun-pit in the area, complete with the remnants of both the gun and its unfortunate crew.

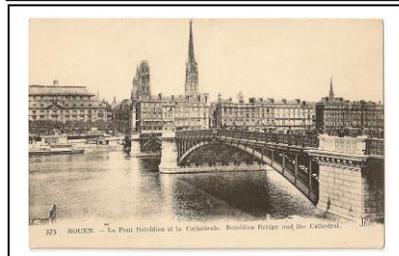
However, there must surely have been at least one untoward incident at that particular time as it was on that day that Driver Wooden was reported as having been wounded and thereupon evacuated to the 49th Casualty Clearing Station at Boves. Later, on that same day, he was placed on board the 21st Ambulance Train and forwarded to the 6th General Hospital in Rouen for treatment to a gun-shot wound to the head, likely only to the scalp*. He is recorded as having been admitted there on the following day, August 18.

**It is to be remembered that, superficial or not, infected wounds in those days before anti-biotics were a serious problem.*

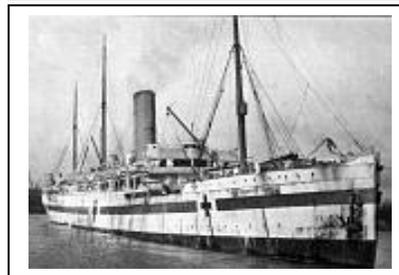
(Right: A British casualty clearing station – the one pictured here under canvas for mobility if and when the necessity arose – being established somewhere in France during the early years of the War. Other such medical establishments were of a much more permanent nature. - from a vintage post-card)



(Right: The River Seine flows through the centre of the Norman city of Rouen under the watchful eye of its venerable cathedral. – from a vintage post-card)



By August 21 it had been decided to send Driver Wooden back to the United Kingdom for further medical attention and, accordingly, on that day he was embarked onto His Majesty's Hospital Ship *Carisbrook Castle* for the cross-Channel journey. On the next day he was transferred bureaucratically to become the responsibility of the Canadian Artillery Reserve Depot at *Witley Camp*, and transported physically to the Norfolk War Hospital in the city of Norwich.



(Right above: The image of HMHS *Carisbrook Castle* is from the *Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site*.)

Having remained in care at Norwich for nine days, Driver Wooden was transferred to the Woodcote Canadian Convalescent Hospital in the town of Epsom on the final day of August where he was considered to be fit for...*light duties*.

What exactly these *light duties* may have been appears not to have been documented in his dossier, but he was to undertake them until the fourth day of October when he was released from Epsom to now enjoy – one hopes – the ten-day furlough granted to military personnel upon discharge from hospital in the United Kingdom.

Those days having then passed – likely at the *Maple Leaf Club* in nearby London which had been left as his forwarding address – Driver Wooden reported to the 2nd Canadian Command Depot* at *Camp Bramshott* on October 14.



(Right: *London – in fact the City of Westminster – in the area of Marble Arch, in or about the year 1913, just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

**As seen come pages above, Command Depots were camps for service personnel recently released from medical care or who were otherwise un-attached to any military unit. There they were to await the arrival of the decision on how they were to be employed – if at all.*



He apparently reported sick as early as October 23 whereupon he was returned at least by October 25 to the so-called *Medical Hut* at *Camp Witley*.

It was then only a day later that he was once more moved, now to the 12th Canadian General Hospital back at *Camp Bramshott* where he was deemed to be...*seriously ill*...and suffering from influenza.

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

The son of Thomas Wooden, fisherman, and of Carrie (*Caroline*) Wooden (née *Courteney*)* – to whom on May 14, 1917, he had willed his all, and also to whom as of June 1 of the same year, he had allotted a monthly fifteen dollars from his pay – of Fortune Road, Grand Bank, Newfoundland, he was also brother to George, Benjamin, Bronson, Maria and to Thomas.

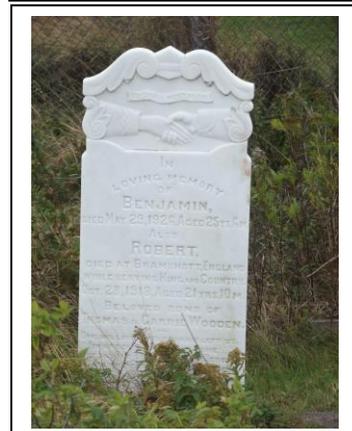
**The couple had married on January 4, 1893.*

Driver Wooden was reported as having *died of sickness* in the 12th Canadian General Hospital, Bramshott, at five minutes to eleven on the evening of October 28, 1918.

(Right above: *The War Memorial in the town of Grand Bank honours the sacrifice of Robert Wooden. – photograph from 2016*)

(Right above: *A family memorial in the Grand Bank Old United Church Cemetery commemorates the life, and also the death, of Robert Wooden. – photograph from 2016*)

(continued)



Robert Wooden had enlisted at the *apparent* age of nineteen years and five months: date of birth at Grand Bank, Newfoundland, (from attestation papers) December 19, 1897; however, the Newfoundland Birth Register records the year as having been 1896 – and the dates of birth of his siblings appear to confirm this.

Driver Robert Wooden was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



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 23, 2023.