



Private John William Billiard (Number 252321) of the 28th (North West) Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in St-Sever Cemetery, Rouen: grave reference Q.II.L.6.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a clerk, the records provide little if any information of his decision to move from Grand Bruit in the Dominion of Newfoundland to Waldeck in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan.



(Previous page: *The image of a cap-badge of the 28th (North West) Battalion is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)

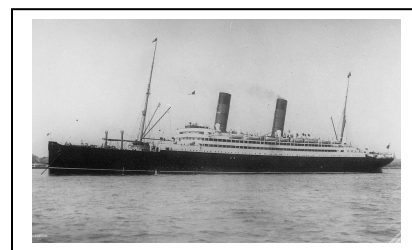
What the same records *do* show, however, is that John William Billiard underwent a medical examination, enlisted, attested and was *taken on strength* by the 209th (Swift Current) Canadian Overseas Battalion all on the same day, March 2 of 1916, in the city of Swift Current*, Saskatchewan. It was all made official, again on March 2, by the declaration – on paper – of the Battalion’s Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel W.O. Smyth, that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

**The town of Swift Current became a city in the year 1914.*

It would seem that the first three months of Private Billiard’s training was to take place in the local facilities of Swift Current itself. Then, after a farewell party in the town, the 209th Battalion departed on June 1 of that 1916 for more formal training at *Camp Hughes* in the province of Manitoba. Private Billiard and his comrades-in-arms were to remain there until the month of November - apart from the time in September allowed those who wished to return home to assist in bringing in the year’s harvest*. Apparently as many as half of the recruits did so.

**Which likely explains the notation on his pay records of the forfeiture by Private Billiard during that period of thirteen days’ pay.* (The above information is from the City of Swift Current web-site.)

Five full months were to pass at Camp Hughes before Private Billiard’s Battalion made the trans-Atlantic passage from Canada to the United Kingdom. The 209th Battalion embarked onto His Majesty’s Transport *Caronia* in Halifax on October 31 of that same 1916, the vessel sailing on the morrow.



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

Private Billiard and his 209th Battalion were not the only ones taking ship on that occasion; also on board were the 110th, the 114th, the 131st, and the 162nd Battalions of Canadian Infantry, plus the 19th Draft from the Canadian Engineers Training Depot. At full strength the six units would have represented close on six-thousand military personnel.

Caronia docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on November 11, 1916, Private Billiard’s unit likely entraining immediately for one of the camps at the Canadian military complex of Shorncliffe in the vicinity of the English-Channel town and harbour of Folkestone. On December 5, Private Billiard was transferred to the 9th Canadian (Reserve) Battalion, at that time in the process of being formed at St. Martin’s Plain Camp, another of the facilities at Shorncliffe*.



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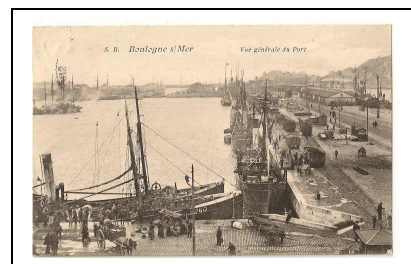
(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016)*

(Right below: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009)*

**The practice seems to have been to assign re-enforcements arriving at the Canadian camps in England, often - but not always - to Reserve Battalions, thence – on paper - to the various battalions already serving on the Continent; the troops were then shipped across the English Channel in re-enforcement drafts to those serving units to which they had been assigned, usually via the large Canadian Base Depot at Le Havre – later on at Étapes.*



On December 28-29 of 1916, Private Billiard was nominally transferred from the 9th Reserve Battalion to the 28th (North West) Battalion and crossed the English Channel with a reinforcement draft – likely from nearby Folkestone to Boulogne on the French coast opposite, just some two hours' sailing-time away.



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

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

Once landed, his detachment was forwarded to the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the French port of Le Havre, on the estuary of the River Seine. Private Billiard was to remain at Le Havre for almost seven weeks according to his files, after which time, on February 14, he left the Depot to join the 2nd Entrenching Battalion* before being despatched on February 22, 1917, a week later, to join the 28th Battalion parent unit.



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



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

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

* * * * *

The 28th (North West) Battalion had been stationed on the Continent since itself disembarking in Boulogne at two-thirty on the morning of September 18, 1915. The unit was an element of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade, it in its turn a component of the 2nd Canadian Division.



Having entrained at Boulogne, the unit travelled to the northern French town of St-Omer where it alit to continue on foot to billets at St-Sylvestre Cappel, near the Franco-Belgian frontier. On September 26 it crossed that border, advancing to the area of Kemmel.

(Above right: The venerable railway station at St-Omer through which passed the 28th Battalion, likely a much busier place during the time of the Great War: Today it has lost much of its former opulence. – photograph from 2015)

The 28th Battalion remained in that sector, at the front, then in support, next in reserve*, on an irregularly regular basis until the month of April of 1916 when it moved a few kilometres to the north-east and closer to Dickebusch and Voormezele, outlying villages to the south of the medieval city of Ypres.



(Right: An artist's impression of the centre of Ypres in the year 1915: By the end of the Great War not much of what is shown here was to be left standing. - from Illustration)

**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*



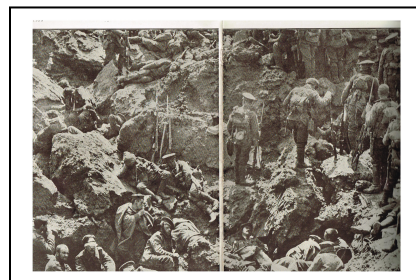
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

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(Preceding page: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

The ***Battle of the St. Éloi Craters*** officially took place from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916 and it had been British units and the troops of the Canadian 2nd Division which had been primarily involved. St. Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it was here that the British had prepared a series of mines under the German lines, mines which they detonated on that March 27.

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They had enjoyed no more success than had the British, and by the 17th, when the battle was officially called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had taken some fifteen-hundred casualties.



(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

The 28th Battalion, being a unit of the Canadian 2nd Division, had played its role during the confrontation. From on or about April 4 to 14 – the Battalion War Diary is unfortunately barely legible – it had been posted into the trenches and into some of the newly-created craters. A single report, of April 8, appears to document heavy fighting with the Battalion’s casualties totalling ninety-five.

Barely seven weeks were to pass before the unit was called upon again. On this occasion it was the enemy who attacked and, although it occurred on that part of the front occupied by the Canadian 3rd Division, the situation was to become serious enough for troops from the 1st and 2nd Divisions to be called upon for support.

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood*, *Maple Copse* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions which dominated the Canadian trenches when the Germans delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they never exploited.



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

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack as early as the following day, an assault which was intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground.

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Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



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

On the day of the first attack, the 28th Battalion had been behind the forward area in Corps Reserve. There it remained until June 5, although ordered to be in a *state of readiness*, to be prepared to move at a half-hour's notice. On that June 5 it moved forward to the front lines to relieve the Royal Canadian Regiment. Despite disruption having been caused by enemy rifle, machine-gun and artillery fire, the relief was complete by two-thirty in the morning of June 6.



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

“A” Company had been ordered into Trenches 70, 71 and 72. These were the positions under which the Germans detonated mines at three o'clock on that afternoon. The explosions, coupled to the accompanying bombardment, according to the War Diary... *practically wiped out the garrison.*



(Right above: *A century later, reminders of a violent past close to the site of Hill 60 to the south-east of Ypres, an area today protected by the Belgian Government against everything except the whims of nature – photograph from 2014*)

The enemy followed up with an attack all along the line held by the 28th Battalion and the depleted unit was forced to cede the front line to the Germans. Further advances by the enemy were apparently held but the War Diarist estimated that... *as a result of operations “A” Coy was practically wiped out, “B” Co had a few remaining and “C” – “D” Coy. suffered many casualties. Effective strength of battalion remains about 50%.*



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

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It was not to be until eleven o'clock on the morning of June 8 that what was left of the 28th Battalion began to retire from the forward area. It remained withdrawn for a month, at *Quebec Camp*, until July 5.

The early summer of 1916 passed. The Battalion had been re-enforced and re-organized after the storms of the actions of the *St-Éloi Craters* and *Mount Sorrel* before, in September, after a period of intense – and as it turned out, optimistic – training, being ordered south to fight in the continuation of the British summer offensive at *the Somme*.

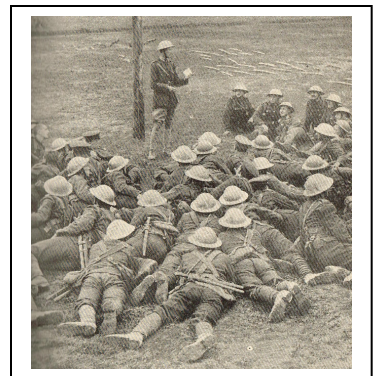
By that September the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of only four hours - of which some nineteen thousand dead.

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



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

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



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

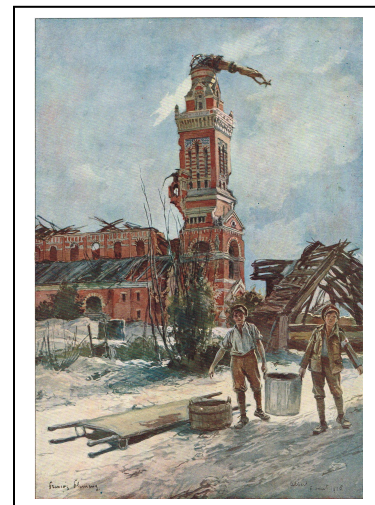
Days before that attack, on September 4, 1916, the 28th Battalion had marched from its temporary billets at Chateau Fort to the railway station in the larger centre of St-Omer, there to board the train to take it south to the area of *the Somme*. The train departed St-Omer at three minutes past eight in the evening, to arrive at its destination, Candas, less than one-hundred kilometres distant, at seven o'clock the next morning. Awaiting the unit was a further three hours' march to the Battalion billets.

After two subsequent days of marching, on September 7 the 28th Battalion arrived at the large British military camp at Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert - and well within the range of the German guns.

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

The unit was to remain bivouacked at Brickfields for the following week during which time the Battalion drilled and trained – co-operation with aircraft spotters was a novelty – for the imminent offensive. At two o'clock on the afternoon of September 14, it paraded before marching to take over the front-line trenches which had been assigned to it, preparatory to an attack at dawn on enemy positions in the remnants of the village of Courcellette.



The attack, having been heralded by an artillery barrage beforehand, went in at twenty minutes past six in the morning. Three of the new 'tanks' had been allocated for the assault, but two were out of commission almost immediately.

Despite this setback, the attack on Courcellette was to be one of the very few advances of the entire *Somme* campaign which would meet the expectations of the planners. It was a success: according to the Battalion War Diary the objective of the Sugar Factory – *la Sucrierie* – had been taken by seven fifty-seven in the morning.



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

The same source also reports three-hundred ten casualties.

On the next day, September 16, the unit retired, and then, for six days of the following week – for reasons unexplained by the Battalion War Diarist - the unit marched hither and thither around the country-side before being bussed back to Brickfields. From there it marched – again – back to the trenches on the night of September 24-25.



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

There had been planned a further infantry action on one of the days that the unit was to be in the trenches; however it was called off because no 'tanks' were available. On October 4, the Battalion retired from the forward area of *the Somme* for the last time and began to wend its way at first to the west, then in a northerly direction, passing to the western side of the city of Arras. It would continue to march until October 16.

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Its temporary destination was a Brigade Reserve area in the vicinity of Aix-Noulette, a commune to the west of the important mining centre of Lens. By October 25 the unit was back in the trenches again, at nearby Souchez.



(Right: *The village of Souchez even before the arrival of the Canadians in the sector, the photograph taken in 1915 – from Le Miroir*)

The winter of 1916-1917 was one of the everyday grind 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 raids by both sides. This latter activity was encouraged by the High Command who felt it to be a morale booster which also kept the troops in the right offensive frame of mind – the troops who were ordered to carry them out in general loathed these operations.



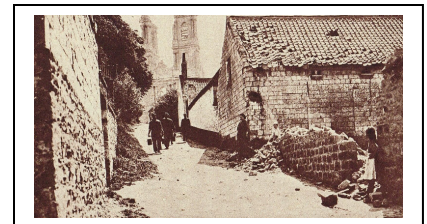
(Right above: *A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

Until the end of the third week of January the 28th Battalion remained close to Souchez. Then it retired for rest and training – perhaps a contradiction in terms – to the areas of Dieval and Burbure, until February 12-13 when it returned forward, on this occasion to the proximity of Écoivres and Mont St-Éloi.

This was when and where Private Billiard joined his new unit.

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The unit was still in Brigade Reserve at Écoivres on February 23 of 1917, the date on which Private Billiard's reinforcement draft of seventy *other ranks* is recorded as having reported to *duty* by the Battalion War Diarist. On the following day, the 24th, the Battalion was back in the trenches.



**Mont St-Éloi is not to be confused with St. Eloy (St-Éloi) in southern Belgium where Canadian forces had already served, Mont St-Éloi is to be found to the north-west of the city of Arras in northern France and was, at the time, well behind the forward area.*



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

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During that final week of February the War Diarist entered nothing much more than... *Usual Trench Warfare* on more than one occasion. Then in March, more than three weeks were spent in reserve by Private Billiard's unit while undergoing training, lectures and drills, all lessons that had to be instilled for the upcoming British offensive which was to become known as the *1st Battle of Arras*.

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



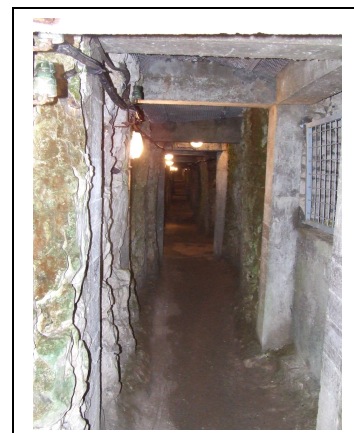
While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was to be a disaster.

(Above right: *The Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands atop Vimy Ridge* – photograph from 2010)

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

It had not been until April 5 that the 28th Battalion was relieved at the front and only then had it retired to prepare for the operation. On April 8 it had moved forward to its starting positions – although *not* via those well-known tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

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



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



The Canadian 2nd Division was not responsible for the Ridge itself, but for the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the slope and on the right-hand – the southerly - side of the attack.

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Thélus was taken by seven o'clock on the morning of April 9, some ninety minutes after the first wave of the attack – at five-thirty in the morning - and a second objective, the village of Les Tilleuls, was captured a half-hour later again.

The War Diary of the 28th Battalion – itself not in the first attack - records that... *At 7.55 a.m. Battalion moved from Assembly Area to take up position on main ARRAS-LENS Road... At 9.35 Battalion advanced on RED Objective and captured same - consolidation commenced immediately. Enemy made feeble resistance. Battalion Headquarters established in Thelus at 4.30 p.m.*



And on this occasion, Battalion casualties had been light.

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

Three days later, on April 12, the unit was out of the line once more, at Bois des Alleux... *cleaning up and resting.*

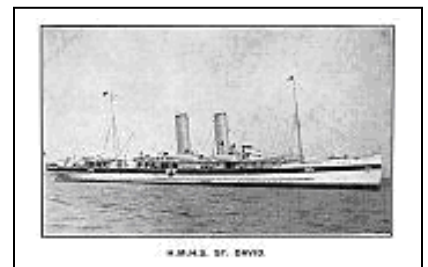
Officially the *Battle of Arras* lasted for some five weeks, a shorter duration than typical of most of the offensives of the Great War. The War itself, however, continued, and life in and out the trenches changed not one iota from one day to the next.



(Right above: *Canadians under shell-fire occupy the third line of trenches on Vimy Ridge: the fighting of the next few days was fought under the same conditions. – from Illustration*)

During the month of May the 28th Battalion was still stationed in the vicinity of the shattered village of Vimy, enduring both the monotony and the perils of the forward area.

It was on May 25 that Private Billiard was wounded for a first time, a bullet perforating his right thigh. By the following day, the 26th, he had been evacuated to the 4th Canadian Field Ambulance at Aux Rietz, from there to be almost immediately transferred to the 13th Canadian Field Ambulance at nearby Grand Servins. Four days later again he was placed on board His Majesty's Hospital Ship *St. David* for the crossing back to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *The photograph of HMHS St. David is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

Having arrived in England, Private Billiard was transported to the Wharnecliffe War Hospital in Sheffield where he was admitted on May 30. There he was to be attended to for the entrance and exit wounds in his thigh. While his injuries were deemed to be *mild*, he nonetheless remained in hospital at Sheffield for twenty-six days, having been capable of getting up out of bed only as of June 6.

Upon his release from Wharnecliffe, Private Billiard was sent to the Canadian Convalescent Hospital at Woodcote Park, Epsom. Entering hospital there on day of his discharge from Sheffield, June 25, he was declared as *fit for duty* on July 4, and was recorded as *on strength* with the 15th (Reserve) Battalion at Bramshott on that same day.



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

The records of Private Billiard during the next eight months are sparse. They are but two in number: He was admitted into the 12th Canadian Stationary Hospital at Bramshott on September(?) 29, to remain there until October 17 while receiving treatment for a venereal problem; then, on March 2 of 1918, he was awarded a Good Conduct Badge*.

**Presented after two years to those whose names were as yet not to be found on the Battalion's charge sheets. In was in the form of a chevron and was worn like an 'upside-down' lance-corporal's stripe.*

Only five weeks after that presentation, Private Billiard was en route back to the Continent.

On this occasion it is likely that Private Billiard's draft travelled via Southampton and Le Havre – this is again only speculation – but it *is* then documented that on April 7 he was transferred from the 15th (Reserve) Battalion back to the strength of the 28th (North West) Battalion and arrived at the 2nd Canadian Base Depot at Étapes on the 8th.

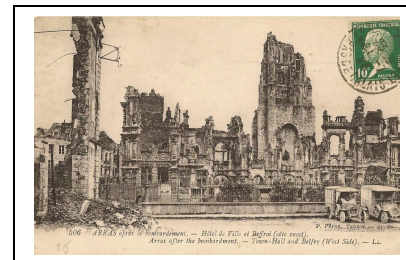
Two days later he was transferred to join the Canadian Corps Reinforcement Camp, also at Étapes, reporting *to duty* on that same day. There Private Billiard was to remain for over a month until, as a soldier of a re-enforcement draft of forty *other ranks*, he left the Camp on May 13, to rendezvous with the 28th Battalion parent unit, which the contingent accordingly did on the following day.



(Right above: *Canadian re-enforcements, in this case Canadian-Scottish led by their pipers, on their way to the front in 1918.* – from *Le Miroir*)

The Battalion was at the time at the front in the Neuville St-Vaast Sector to the north of Arras, May 14, the day of his arrival being recorded as a *quiet day* in the War Diary.

(Right: *The remnants of the City Hall and clock-tower of Arras soon after the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

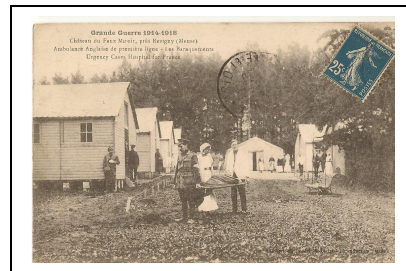


Some three weeks later, on June 2, while at the front in the same sector, Private Billiard was wounded on a second occasion, incurring gun-shot wounds to the abdomen. He was taken to the 4th Canadian Field Ambulance at Le Fermont and then to an unidentified casualty clearing station before being transferred and admitted into the 1st Australian General Hospital in Rouen on the next day, June 3.

(Right below: A *British field ambulance, of a more permanent nature than some* – from a vintage post-card)

This second wound, in contrast to the first, was *not* mild: the records on the day of his admission read *dangerously ill*.

The son of Henry Martin Billiard*, fisherman, and of Edith Billiard (née *Ingram*, deceased November 8, 1901) of Grand Bruit, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Elizabeth-Ann, to Joseph-Henry, Mary-Jane, Hannah, Lucy and to Caroline.



Private Billiard was reported as having *died of wounds* in the 1st Australian General Hospital on June 6, 1918.

**He later married Mary Jane Scott.*

Having previously made a will in which he left his all to a Mr. and Mrs. Robert Humphreys (a sister?) of Waldeck, Saskatchewan, on the day of his death this testament was superseded by a second one in which he left everything to his youngest sister, Lucy. It was witnessed by two of the staff at the 1st AGH. Among Private Billiard's papers is to be found this later will upon which is written: *CERTIFIED THAT this WILL was found loose amongst the effects of No. 252321, Pte. Billiard, J.W., 28th Canadian Infantry.*

While his attestation documents cite his date of birth date as being November 7, 1890, a second source (Rose Blanche Church of England Parish Records) records November 6, 1886.

Private John William Billiard 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 27, 2023.