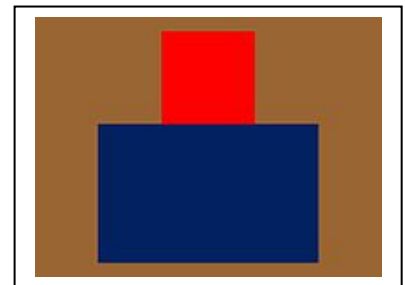


**Private John Joseph Bowen (Number 469705) of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (*New Brunswick*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.**

**(Right: *The image of the shoulder-flash of the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (New Brunswick) is from the Wikipedia Web-site.*)**



**(continued)**

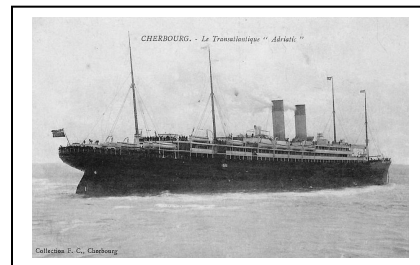
His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a steelworker, there seems to be no information readily available about his departure from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. However, it *is* documented that John Joseph Bowen enlisted\* and underwent a medical examination at Sydney on August 31, 1915, before attesting on the following day.

*\*This is written on his Medical History Sheet.*

On September 9 he was officially *taken on strength* by ‘D’ Company of the 64<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the Officer Commanding at the time declaring – on paper – that... *having finally been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

While this is yet to be confirmed, it would appear that Private Bowen – and thus at least a number of the Battalion’s recruits – trained in the Halifax area. This, however, is based solely upon medical records: on February 7 he underwent dental surgery performed by the Halifax Dental Corps; he was then to spend eleven days – March 3 to March 14 of 1916 – in the hospital for infectious diseases (Halifax?) for treatment to rubella (*German measles*). Then at the end of that same month, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, he underwent extensive dental surgery, once more in Halifax.

Two days after Private Bowen’s second brush with the dentist, on the final day of March, the thirty-eight officers and one-thousand eighty-eight *other ranks* of the 64<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion embarked onto His Majesty’s Transport *Adriatic* in Halifax harbour. Private Bowen’s unit was not to sail alone: taking passage also were the 73<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, the Coburg Heavy Draft Battery and the 8<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance which undertook medical responsibilities during the voyage.



The vessel departed on the morrow, April 1, with a total of two-thousand, four-hundred thirty-seven military personnel on board, to arrive in the English west-coast port of Liverpool at three o’clock in the afternoon of April 9.

(Right above: *The image of the SS Adriatic is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-site.*)

Upon its arrival in the United Kingdom, the 64<sup>th</sup> Battalion was transported to the Canadian military complex which had recently been established in the county of Hampshire and in the proximity of the villages of Bramshott and Liphook. On April 19, ten days after his disembarkation, Private Bowen made enough of a name for himself as to merit ten days *confinement to barracks for misconduct*. The nature of the misdemeanour remains undisclosed.



(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*)

(continued)

Two months later again, on June 24, 1916, Private Bowen was transferred to the Canadian 12<sup>th</sup> (Reserve) Battalion at Shorncliffe, another Canadian military establishment, this one on the Kentish coast and close to the town and port of Folkestone. This posting to the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion lasted a mere four days: it was a final period of organization before being once again sent overseas, on this occasion to France via the English port of Folkestone, and Boulogne, on the coast opposite and only hours' sailing time away.

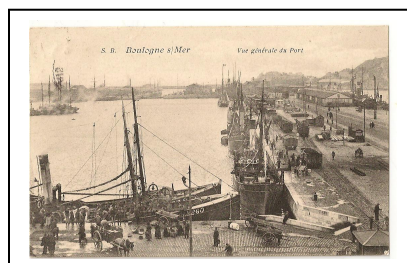


(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 2016)



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

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



Private Bowen was to next pass briefly through the Canadian Base Depot in the vicinity of the port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. By June 28\* he had again been transferred, on paper, from the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion to be taken on strength by the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (New Brunswick) which was already serving on the *Western Front*.

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



On the same June 28\* he was despatched from the Base Depot to report to duty to his new unit. This he did – likely as one of a draft - on the morrow, June 29, at a time when the Battalion War Diary reports the unit as just having moved... to trenches left sub sector *St. Eloi*.

*\*This may well have been on June 27 or even the day prior as the Canadian Base Depot Calendar shows neither arrivals nor departures for June 28.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion (New Brunswick) had been serving on the Continent since September of the previous year, 1915. It was an element of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division. Since its arrival it had served in an area of the front to the south of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres and close to the lethal *Ypres Salient* itself.





(Preceding page: *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*)

In early April of the next year, 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire on a large scale. It was at a place named St-Éloi where, at the end of March – on the 27<sup>th</sup> - the British had detonated a series of mines under the German lines and then attacked. The newly-arrived Canadian formation was to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, the damage done to the terrain by the explosions, the putrid weather which turned the newly-created craters into ponds and the earth into a quagmire, and a resolute German defence greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had won back the lost territory and had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.



(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – from Illustration*)

The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, albeit a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, had found itself playing a peripheral role: while other units were fighting up to their waists in water, the Battalion War Diarist could find time to comment on the weather for twenty-two days in a row.

Then on June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British (and also Canadian) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse* and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.

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

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians were able to patch up their defences. In the meanwhile, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was still in the area of St-Éloi, serving in the left sub-sector.



It was '*standing to*' in the same place for the following four days. Thus it took no part in the counter-strike of the day following the attack, June 3, an operation which proved to be a costly disaster for the Canadians. In fact, on June 7, the Battalion found itself retiring to a camp in the rear rather than advancing towards the fighting.



(continued)



**(Preceding page: *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 next day, however, the unit was sent forward to relieve troops in support positions in the area of *Railway Dugouts*, just behind the places which had seen the heaviest fighting. There it remained until June 12 when, once more, it retired to the rear area.**

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



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

**By the time that the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved up to the front again on the next day, the action at *Mount Sorrel* and vicinity was all but over. During the night of June 12-13 the Canadians had once again attacked and, thanks to better organization and a good artillery barrage, on this occasion had taken back almost all of the lost ground. Both sides were now back much where they had been eleven days earlier – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.**

**It should be added, however, that although units from the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions saw action during those eleven days, it was the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division on whose sector that the German onslaught fell, and it was that same Division which, logically, was the one which bore the brunt of the fighting.**

**Thus, after having played its roll at *Mount Sorrel*, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was relieved and withdrew to Camp “D” on June 20. It remained there until the day prior to Private Bowen’s reported arrival when it returned to the trenches.**

\* \* \* \* \*

**Twelve days after Private Bowen’s arrival, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion retired to the support area, not far behind the front lines. There it was engaged in supplying working-parties for defence construction and carrying-parties for supply the troops manning the forward area. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the Battalion moved further back to the rest area at *Alberta Camp*. The veterans in the Battalion were once more enduring the rigours and routines of life in the trenches\*, but it was a new experience for Private Bowen.**

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

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

*(Right: 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-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)*



The second half of that month of July was spent at first in *Alberta Camp* and then further back again, at Brigade Reserve in the Vierstraat Sector. However, on the other hand, after this respite, the Battalion was then posted back into the trenches for twenty-two of the first twenty-four days of August.

Having retired to Alberta Camp near Reninghelst on August 25, the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion prepared to leave Belgium. The Battalion War Diarist noted in his entry of that day: *All ranks in the best of spirits anticipating the move and eager to effect all details in the number of days training, SOMME OPERATIONS.*

The training area for the Battalion was at Tilques, back over the border in northern France and close to the larger centre of St-Omer. It had required three successive days of marching for the unit to reach its billets at Éperlecques by August 28 before commencing training on the morrow. One of the first items on the agenda of the 29<sup>th</sup> was the replacement of the Canadian-made Ross rifles by its British counterpart, the Short Lee-Enfield Mark III.

A week later the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched to the railway-station in Arcques to entrain for the journey south to Conteville. A day spent resting in billets was followed by five more on foot, a march which terminated on September 11 at the Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*), a large military camp in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.

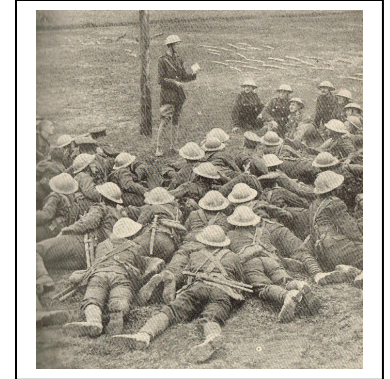
*(Right: Canadian soldiers in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background – from Illustration)*

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

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



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



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

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



On September 15, a general attack ordered by the British High Command was undertaken, the Canadians playing an important role in the offensive. The 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion was in reserve at the outset and, as such, did not move forward until five o'clock in the afternoon, twelve hours after the initial assault, at which time it re-enforced the efforts of the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Battalions.

On the following day the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, according to its War Diarist, was ordered to the relative safety of a line of shell holes where it apparently was to stay all day and... *where the most intense shelling was endured by the battalion throughout this entire day.*



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

On the 17<sup>th</sup> the unit was moved once more and took up positions in a sunken road, to once again remain there all day. The only exception was that of 'B' Company which assisted in an attack delivered by the 24<sup>th</sup> Battalion before *it* also moved to the sunken road. The attack in question... *met with considerable opposition and rifle and machine gun fire was very heavy.*



Unfortunately, there appears to be no record of the precise role of Private Bowen during these days.

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



The son of Michael (*Mike*) Bowen, fisherman, and of Catherine (*Kate*), deceased July 28, 1919, of St. Mary's, Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty dollars from his pay and to whom he had willed his all, he was also brother to Daniel, to Stanislaus, to Cecil, Philomena and Bridget. At first reported as *missing in action* during the period September 15-17, Private Bowen was later documented as having been *killed in action* on September 17, 1916.

John Joseph Bowen had enlisted at the *apparent age* of nineteen years and ten months: date of birth at St. Mary's, Newfoundland, October 6, 1895.

Private John Joseph Bowen 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 27, 2023.

