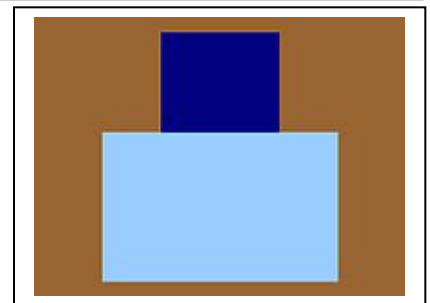


Private Nathan Butler (Number 414983) of the 60th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the shoulder-flash of the 60th Battalion (Victoria Rifles of Canada) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)

(continued)



There are, in the *Ancestry.ca* documentation, records of four crossings of the Cabot Strait by a Nathan (also *Nath* and *N*) Butler – the earliest in June of 1911, the latest in November of 1914 – but whether any, or all of them, refer to the young man whose military history is written here, does not appear possible to confirm.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as being that of a chemist, Nathan Butler enlisted, likely in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on August 2 of 1915, his pay records showing this to be the first day for which the Canadian Army remunerated him for his services. This small card also shows this to be the day on which he was *taken on strength* by the 40th Battalion (*Nova Scotia*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

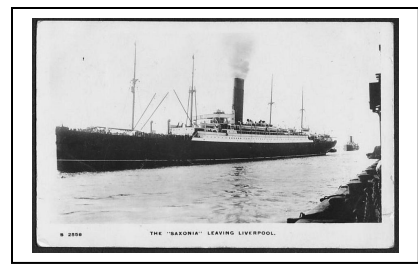
Private Butler then attested on August 13, the day after he had presented himself for a medical examination. Then on August 16, three days later, the last of the formalities came about when the Commanding Officer of the Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Vincent, declared – on paper – that... *having final been approved and inspected by this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The 40th Battalion - its military roots being the 63rd Regiment (*Halifax Rifles*) of the Canadian Militia - had been mobilized at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, on May 11, 1915, but by the time of Private Butler's attestation it had been transferred – on June 21 – to the large military complex at Valcartier, Québec. In all likelihood, Private Butler had proceeded directly to Valcartier after his attestation in Sydney, to commence training.

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



It was on October 18 during that autumn of 1915 that Private Butler's unit boarded His Majesty's Transport *Saxonia* in Québec for the trans-Atlantic crossing. It was apparently a fast passage: the vessel sailed on the same day and then docked in the United Kingdom in the English south-coast naval harbour of Plymouth-Devonport on October 25.

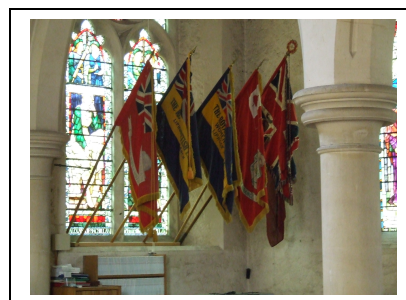


The 40th Battalion and Private Butler had not taken passage alone on *Saxonia*: there was at least one other unit on board, the 41st Battalion of Canadian Infantry.

(Right above: *The photograph of 'The Saxonia leaving Liverpool' is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries.*)

From Plymouth the 40th Battalion left by train to be transported to Bramshott Military Camp in the not-too-distant county of Hampshire where apparently it was the first Canadian unit to be stationed there. Private Butler was to remain at Bramshott until the spring of the following year, 1916.

(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 40th Battalion had been authorized and recruitment had taken place with the original intention that the unit was to be sent on *active service*. However, it had then been used as a reserve pool for other battalions and was subsequently designated as a reserve battalion, finally to be disbanded in 1917. At some time before March of 1916 it was designated as the 40th Canadian (*Reserve*) Battalion and its base relocated from Bramshott to East Sandling, a part of the large Canadian military complex of Shorncliffe, adjacent to the English Channel town and harbour of Folkestone.

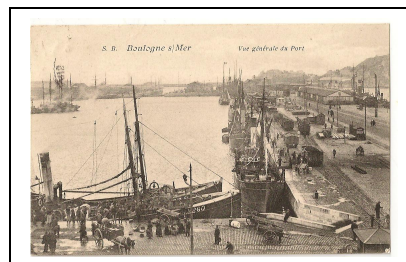


(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

(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*)



On April 21 of 1916 – two months after having willed his all to his mother – Private Butler was transferred on paper to the 60th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles of Canada*), by then serving on the Western Front. Two days afterwards he was on his way with a re-enforcement draft to the Continent, passing via nearby Folkestone before dis-embarking in Boulogne on the coast opposite, from where the contingent made its way to the Canadian General Base Depot at Le Havre.



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

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



It was to be yet a further nineteen days, the date May 13, before Private Butler was despatched from the Base Depot to join the parent unit of the 60th Battalion *in the field*, the date on which he did so being apparently unrecorded in the Battalion War Diary.

* * * * *

(continued)

The 60th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles of Canada*) was a component of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the lately-formed Canadian 3rd Division which had come into official being at mid-night of December 31, 1915 and January 1 of the New Year 1916. Some of its units were already on the Continent at that time, some having been there for some months; others, such as the 60th Battalion, were yet to cross from England.

The Battalion had itself left the Bramshott Military Camp two months prior to Private Butler, on February 20, 1916, for the crossing to France, thence almost immediately passing on to the Western Front. By ten o'clock in the evening of the 22nd it found itself in the area of the Franco-Belgian border, at Godeswaerwede, having taken a long twenty-two hours by train to make what is a journey of about perhaps three-hundred kilometres.

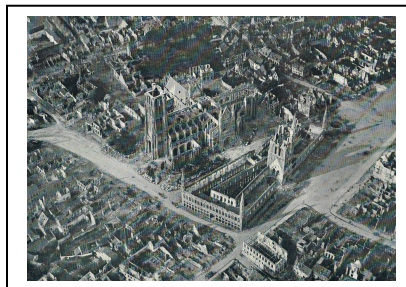


(Right above: *While the caption reads that these troops are 'English', this could mean any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)

At first stationed in a quiet sector to the southern part of the front, in March the 3rd Canadian Division had been handed the responsibility for another area. This new posting was to prove a bit more exciting than the one left behind.

* * * * *

Thus, by the time of the arrival of Private Butler's contingent in May, the 60th Battalion was operating in an area to the south-east of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres. It had been posted to the *Salient*.



The *Ypres Salient* was to prove to be one of most lethal theatres of the *Great War*, being fought over from October of 1914 up until October of 1918, and over the course of the conflict was to be the site of four major battles and many other hard-fought lesser engagements.

(Right above: *An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915 – just after the battle of 2nd Ypres - which shows the shell of the medieval city, an image entitled Ypres-la-Morte (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from Illustration*)



The 60th Battalion was operating in a sector comprising the vestiges of the village of *Hooge*, of *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* as well as *Sanctuary Wood*, all to become well-known names in Canadian history only weeks later.

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

From June 2 to 14 was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood* 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 below: *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)

The Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, reacted by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation was a dismal failure, many of the intended attacks never went in – those that did went in piecemeal and the assaulting troops were cut to pieces - the enemy remained where he was and the Canadians were left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.



On June 2, the first day of the emergency, the twenty-five officers and six-hundred ninety-seven other ranks of the 60th Battalion were ordered to move forward from the rear, towards the area of the German advance. On the following day it was then to support the 52nd Battalion in the ordered counter-attack. Heavy casualties ensued among the Battalion personnel during the advance of June 3 and a proposed continuation of the operation for that evening was eventually cancelled. On the 4th the unit moved forward to relieve the PPCLIs* in what had by then become a holding operation.

**Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Regiment*

Two days later the enemy advanced on the Canadian north flank, on this occasion in the area of *Hooge* where mines were detonated under the Canadian positions. This time Byng decided not to counter-attack but to prepare for a co-ordinated strike on a later date, and the 60th Battalion remained in its trenches. Over half of the remaining Battalion strength was relieved later that night, the remainder retiring some twenty-four hours later again.



(Right above: *Maple Copse Cemetery – the majority of the dead are Canadian - a century after the action at nearby Mount Sorrel, Hill 60 and Sanctuary Wood* – photograph from 2014)

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

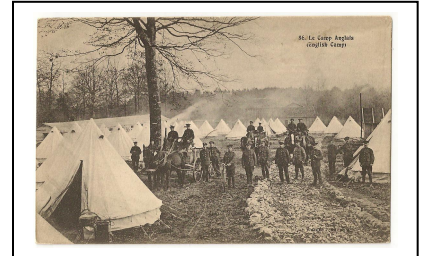


(continued)

By the time that the Battalion next moved forward on the night of June 13-14, the Canadian counter-attack had already gone in, recapturing most of the lost ground. Although German artillery fire was heavy at times, there was little further infantry action, the position of the lines after June 13 apparently having returned to mostly as they had been *before* the engagement. But the cemeteries were a lot more occupied.

On June 15, the 60th Battalion moved westward along the Ypres-Poperinghe Road to Camp 'A' where the unit was to remain until the final day of the month. There it began once again to settle into the routines and rigours of trench warfare*.

(Right: A typical British Army Camp during a winter period somewhere on the Continent – from a vintage post-card)



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



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

(Right above: Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in late 1916, by then equipped with helmets and with the less visible Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle – from Illustration)

The first three weeks of July followed this set pattern for the 60th Battalion: at first the front line, next in support at Ypres, then to reserve near the northern French community of Steenvoorde where the personnel trained and also played sports. On the 26th the unit moved forward once more and the pattern of postings resumed, this time in reverse order.

On August 11, by then equipped with the British-made Lee-Enfield Short rifle which had replaced the Canadian Ross, the Battalion occupied the forward trenches at *Hill 60*, scene of some of the fighting two months beforehand. There it relieved the 10th Battalion, also of Canadian Infantry.

(Right: *Hill 60* a century after the great War, today preserved - as much as nature will allow - by the Belgian Government – photograph from 1915)



(continued)

On the following day the German artillery bombarded the Canadian positions heavily in support of some strong battle patrols sent across No-Man's-Land. However, for the most part these local attacks were repulsed before having reached the Canadian-held trenches, or were contained where they had reached their objectives before being driven away.

For the rest of the front-line tour, the Battalion War Diary reports the time for the most part as being... *relatively quiet*.

The Battalion was to move again to the front in the *Ypres Salient* only days after having been relieved, on August 20, for yet another four-day tour, whereupon, relieved by British forces, it marched back to Ypres from where it was transported by train to St. Lawrence Camp. The 60th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles of Canada*) was not to return to *the Salient*.

And nor was Private Butler.

On August 27 the Battalion, with the other battalions of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, arrived, via Poperinghe, at billets in the area of Steenvoorde. According to the Battalion War Diarist, the 9th was the... *Last Brigade of 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Can. Division to leave the Ypres Salient*.

Private Butler's unit remained in its billets in the area of Steenvoorde until September 7, undergoing training in attacking entrenched positions and also in co-operation with aircraft – although apparently more often than not these exercises were cancelled due to poor weather. On the 7th the Battalion was taken by bus to Arques where it boarded a train which carried it southwards, to Auxi-le-Chateau in which community it arrived at five o'clock on the following morning, September 8.

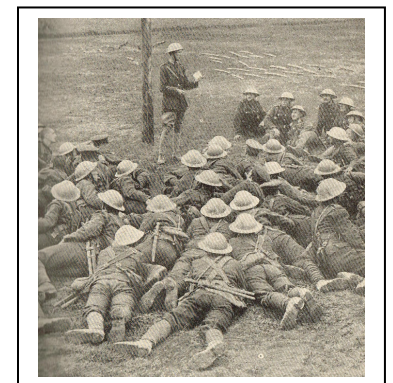
From Auxi-le-Chateau Private Butler and his comrades-in-arms were now to march for five of the next six days, to arrive at the large camp which had been established at the Brickfields (*La Briqueterie*), in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert.



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

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 had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short space 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.



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

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 Courcelette.



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

The 60th Battalion reported to the Brickfields at six-thirty in the evening of September 14 where it bivouacked until the next day. During that night the Battalion personnel were undoubtedly disturbed by the noise of the heavy British artillery barrage which was preceding the early-hour attack of the morning of the 15th.

The unit, however, was not one of those which went into action in those early hours of that September 15. During the day it merely moved to another camp, Usna Hill, where once more it spent a night under canvas.

On the 16th, Private Butler's Battalion was ordered forward into the area of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the remnants of the village of La Boisselle. Further along the way, the unit was equipped for an attack which the Battalion was to put in at six-thirty that evening, in support of a planned earlier attack on the German *Zollern Graben Trench* system.



This first attack proved to be a failure and, in going forward to reinforce the 42nd Battalion which had undertaken it, the 60th suffered heavy casualties from both artillery and machine-gun fire. Some of the troops managed to move up into what should have been the Battalion's jumping-off point for the six-thirty attack, but others were ordered to take shelter in shell-holes.

Battalion casualties for this operation – which lasted from September 16 to 23 – numbered approximately three-hundred all ranks.

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

The son of John Butler (former fisherman, deceased October 16, 1898) and of Abigail Butler (née *Taylor*) of the South Side, Cupids, he was also brother to Robert, Laura, William (see below*), to Fanny and to Mary-Ann. Private Butler was reported as having been...*killed in action*...on September 16 of 1916, during the fighting of the day at Flers-Courcelette although his body was not to be recovered.

Nathan Butler had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-two years and six months: date of birth in Cupids, Newfoundland, February 30, 1893.

Private Nathan Butler was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



**William Butler (Number 1428x) of the (Newfoundland) Royal Naval Reserve, was a seaman on HMS Ladybird (gunboat). He died of typhoid – a second source has cerebral tuberculosis - at Ismailia on 11/10/1916 and was laid to rest in Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery on the Suez Canal, Egypt. He passed away at the age of twenty-two years.*



(Right above: The photograph of His Majesty's Ship Ladybird is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

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.