



Pioneer Richard Clarke (Number 478587) of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force, is buried in Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery: Grave reference VI.D.1A.

Richard Clarke's occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a miner, he may have originally emigrated from the Dominion of Newfoundland in the year 1900 as suggested by the 1911 Canadian Census. By the time of his enlistment he appears to have been working in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, from where he apparently travelled to the industrial town of Sydney to enlist on September 14, the first day on which he is recorded on an official Canadian Army pay slip.



(Preceding page: *The image of the badge of the 2nd Battalion, Canadian Pioneers is from the Militarybadgcollection.com web-site.*)

On that same day – and on the same small card – Private Richard Clarke is also documented as having been *taken on strength* by the Sydney Depot Company of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

He is next recorded some two weeks later as having presented himself for medical examination and also as having attested, once again in the industrial town of Sydney and both on the same day, September 27, 1915.

On that same September 27 he was ordered transferred to the Re-enforcement Companies of the Royal Canadian Regiment which had only during the month before returned from garrison duties in Bermuda. The unit had then been stationed in Halifax before being forwarded to serve in Europe. However, Private Clarke was to remain a soldier of the RCR for a bare three months*.

**On the day before he was transferred the parent body of the RCR had sailed for the United Kingdom. A further draft left on October 3; but had he not then taken ship when he did (see below) – and instead remained a soldier of the RCR - Private Clarke would not have left for overseas for a further four months.*

Meanwhile, to the west, the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion based in Guelph had been recruiting throughout Ontario during that summer and autumn of 1915. Despatched to travel to *overseas service*, the unit left Guelph on November 16 and passed through Ottawa on its way to Québec. There it arrived on the 18th, two days later. Having then trained in on near Québec* from that date until December 4, the Pioneer Battalion on that evening entrained once more, this time for the overnight railway journey to the east-coast port of Halifax.

**Valcartier, the large mobilization camp nearby, seems not to be mentioned in his files.*

Pioneer Clarke's personal files cite him being transferred from the RCR to the 2nd Pioneer Battalion on November 30-December 1, but there are no further details. On the same December 1, he began to allocate a monthly twenty dollars to his wife from his pay – as a Pioneer he was earning one dollar and ten cents per day.

On December 6, 1915, the *Pacific Steam Navigation Company* steamer SS *Orduna** took on board Pioneer Clarke's 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion in Halifax harbour and sailed for the United Kingdom later on that same day. On December 14th, eight days later again, the vessel berthed in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport.



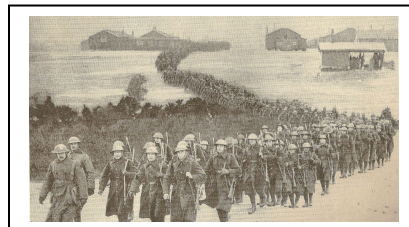
(Right above: *The image of the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Orduna is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

(continued)

**Certain vessels were requisitioned during the War by the government to transport military personnel and related supplies and thus were designated HMT – His Majesty’s Transport – but others (apparently Orduna is an example) were simply leased for the occasion when the need arose, at times complying with the vessel’s commercial schedule.*

This same commercial schedule may well be the reason that there appear to be no other military personnel taking passage on Orduna for the trans-Atlantic crossing.

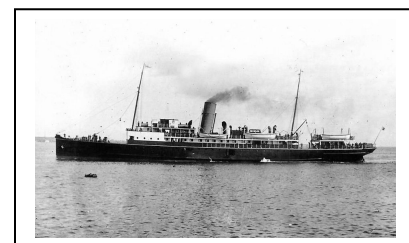
At eleven o’clock on the morning of December 14, the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion boarded a train which transported it to the vicinity of the venerable English cathedral city of Winchester in the county of Hampshire. Once having detrained, the unit marched to the military encampment at Hazely Down where it was to remain for some twelve weeks.



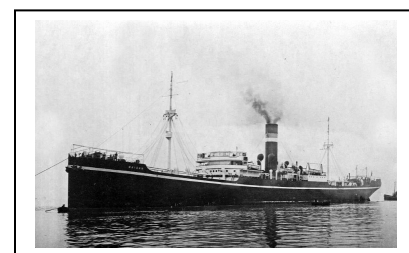
It was while at Hazely Down that Pioneer Clarke was prevailed upon to write a will before proceeding to the Continent; he penned it on February 28 of 1916, bequeathing his everything to his wife.

(Right above: A bleak-looking Hazely Down Camp at a later period of the war – during the winter of 1918 – from The War Illustrated)

On March 7 the 2nd Canadian Pioneer Battalion embarked onto two ships in the English south-coast port of Southampton: on board the *Caesarea* were twenty-two officers and five-hundred fourteen *other ranks*; eight officers and two-hundred forty-eight *other ranks* travelled on *Maidan*, this ship also carrying the Battalion’s transport and stores.



On the following morning, March 8, the two ships docked in the port-city of Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. Onto which vessel Pioneer Clarke had embarked is not documented.



However, if it had been *Caesarea*, then, upon arrival in Le Havre, he would have spent the remainder of the day in a rest camp; if otherwise, he was likely to have passed the next number of hours unloading everything that *Maidan* carried.

(Right above: The images of Caesarea (top) and Maidan are both from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)

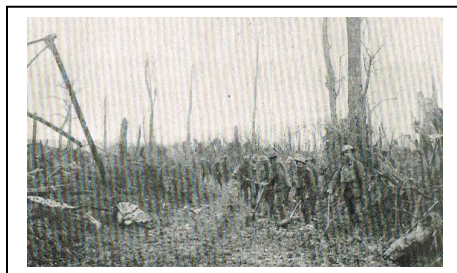
(Right: The French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card)



At midnight on the same day, the Pioneers entrained and travelled north to the town of Bailleul on the Franco-Belgian border. It was a railway-journey which was to take them some twenty-two hours, their travels subsequently terminating with a ten-kilometre march to the *Scherpenberg Barracks* where the unit arrived at three o’clock in the morning.

The Canadian 2nd Pioneer Battalion was attached to the Canadian 2nd Division upon its arrival on the Continent in that March of 1916 and thus was stationed in Belgium with the Division during the earlier days of its war in a sector between the city of Ypres and the frontier with France to the south.

However, the duties of a pioneer battalion were unlike that of a regular battalion. Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction, the repairs and the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his physique and also for his experience in such work.

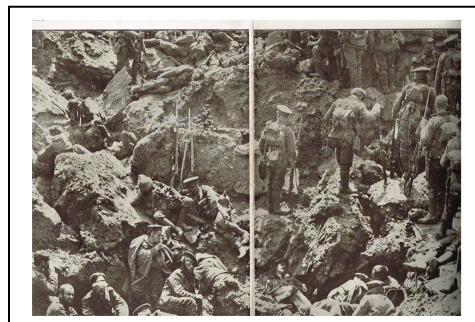


Nevertheless, often while working under fire, the Pioneers shared the dangers of life at the front with all the other troops which were stationed there.

(Right above: *Canadian pioneers or sappers building a road somewhere on the Continent... 'in liberated territory' – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

**In fact, much of the work done was also the responsibility at times of the Engineers. In 1917, when the Pioneer Battalions began to be disbanded, many of those former Pioneers were transferred to Engineer units.*

There were times also when the sappers of the Pioneer Battalions were obliged to act as regular infantry. On March 27, 'B' and 'C' Companies of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, during the mining operation and subsequent British and Canadian attack at St-Éloi, were... *in trenches. Took part in operations connected with the action... Casualties "B" Company 1 killed, 8 wounded, "C" Company 1 killed, 2 wounded.* (Battalion War Diary)



(Right above: *Perhaps staged, described as a photograph of the aftermath of an action subsequent to the detonation of a mine such as described above – from Le Miroir or Illustration*)

A further short extract from the Battalion War Diary, this entry from April 15, a month after the unit's arrival in Belgium, may give an idea of the work involved during a not un-typical day, on this occasion for 'C' Company: *Finished the excavation of 7 dugouts, dug the entry trench to the 8th dugout, drained the 9th dugout, filled 2500 sandbags. Filled in the straight trench at the traverse. Returned to camp at 2.30 a.m.*

The following excerpt is also taken from the Battalion War Diary: *Camp "A" 19-4-16 ... On the night of the 19th/20th no working parties reached their destination owing to the heavy shelling which took place between the hours of 8. P.m. and midnight. The Company which was detailed to move to VOORMEZELE was held in Camp until 11.40 p.m. Its transport which had moved off prior to the commencement of the shelling having been turned back at DICKEBUSCH and told to return to Camp.*

This detachment with its transport reached VOORMEZELE about 1 a.m. Its transport arrived back in Camp about 3. a.m. reporting the safe delivery of Company baggage, 2 casualties were reported.

There is also a casualty report: Was proceeding with his Company into Voormezele about 1 am on the morning of April 20 1916, and just as they were coming out of a communication trench Private Clarke was hit by a machine gun bullet. He was evacuated to No. 10 Casualty Clearing Station* where he succumbed to his wounds two days later.

****The Number 10 CCS was established at the Rémy (railway) Sidings to the south of the community of Poperinghe – as were many other medical facilities – and the Lijssenhoek Military Cemetery was primarily used to bury those who died in those places. Almost ten-thousand Commonwealth dead of the Great War lie within its boundaries.***



(Right: Voormezele Enclosures 1 & 2 Cemetery stands in the reconstructed community – photograph from 2014)

The son of Henry Clarke and of (perhaps *Mary* or *Susan*) Jane Clarke (née *Addy*, *Adey* or *Eddy*) of Brookside Street, Glace Bay, he was husband of Elizabeth Clarke (née *Hayward*) of Brookside Street, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, and father to Annie, Eveline, Edith and Josiah. Richard was also brother to Julia-Snook, Hannah-Jane, Anna-Ellen and to Josiah.

Pioneer Clarke was reported as having *died of wounds* – a gun-shot wound to the abdomen - on April 22 by the Commanding Officer of the 10th Casualty Clearing Station.



Richard Clarke had enlisted at the apparent age of thirty-three years and one month: date of birth in Labrador*, August 10, 1882.

****Although born months prior, Richard and his siblings were baptized in the winter months, after the end of the Labrador fishing season.***

(Right: The portrait of Private Richard Clarke is from the Ancestry.ca web-site.)

Private Richard Clarke 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.