

Lieutenant\* Francis (*Frank* in *Library & Archives Canada*) Peter Collins of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Pioneers, is buried in Aix-Noulette Communal Cemetery Extension: Grave reference I.G.16.

*\*Officers were often promoted from the ranks in which case their records contain an enlistment number – although it then was no longer referred to. However, as in the case of Lieutenant Collins, many other officers did not enlist at all but, upon request, were granted a Commission from the outset of their service; they therefore have no enlistment (regimental) number.*



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

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a civil engineer, Frank Peter Collins was already living in Montreal, at 38, St. Joseph Boulevard, by the time of his enlistment. He had likely studied at McGill University as he cites previous military service, in “B” Company of the COTC (*Canadian Officers Training Corps*) and one year with the McGill COTC (are both these instances one and the same?) before being attached in November of 1915 - presumably as an officer - to the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery.

One month after this attachment, on December 15 of 1915, his *Officers’ Declaration Paper* records him as being assigned\* to the 148<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He had undergone a medical examination on the preceding day.

*\*The document uses the term ‘enlistment’ but as pointed out above, this is likely an incorrect usage. In any case, he was an officer at this time as his medical report of that time is prefaced by the following: I have examined the above Officer with the Regulations for Army Medical Services.*

Although the 148<sup>th</sup> Battalion is recorded as sailing for the United Kingdom on September 27 of 1916, Lieutenant Collins had apparently already departed for overseas service by that date. He is recorded as having embarked on August 21, 1916, onto His Majesty’s Transport *Olympic*, sister ship to *Britannic* - to be sunk in the Mediterranean in November of 1916 - and also of the ill-starred *Titanic*.



The vessel sailed from Halifax on August 23 or 24 – depending on the source – to dock in the English west-coast port of Liverpool on the 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> – once again the sources differ.

Lieutenant Collins had likely been attached to the OTC unit which had also taken passage. He had also sailed in the company of the 127<sup>th</sup>, 129<sup>th</sup>, 135<sup>th</sup>, 137<sup>th</sup> and 138<sup>th</sup> Battalions of Canadian Infantry, and with the personnel of the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Stationary Hospital.

(Right above: *HMT Olympic on the right lies at anchor along with HMHS Aquitania, centre, at Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915. – from a photograph from the Imperial War Museum, London*)

Upon his arrival in England, Lieutenant Collins was recorded as being very briefly, and perhaps only on paper, attached to the General Officer Reserve at the Canadian Training Depot at Shorncliffe, where a large Canadian complex was being established close to the English-Channel town of Folkestone in the county of Kent. Less than twenty-four hours later, on August 30, he had been *taken on strength* by the Canadian Military School, also at Shorncliffe.



(continued)



(Previous page: *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*)

On September 24, Lieutenant Collins was once more transferred, on this occasion to the Canadian Pioneer Training Depot at Caesar's Camp, again a component of the Shorncliffe establishment, and to the 5<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Training Battalion.

This attachment was also to be of a short duration: on October 4, 1916, a mere ten days later, he was one of a draft of officers to sail to the Continent, likely from nearby Folkestone to Boulogne on the French coast opposite, some two hours' sailing-time away.

(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of 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*)

Upon arrival in France, the officers were transported to the Canadian Base Depot adjacent to the French port-city of Le Havre where they remained for only days before being posted to their respective units. In the case of Lieutenant Collins, it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion, already serving on the Continent, to which he reported *to duty* on October 14.

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

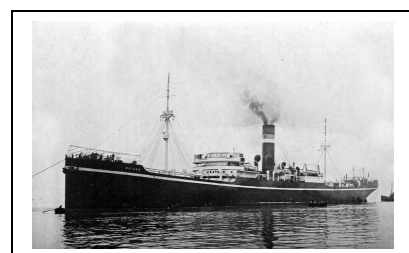
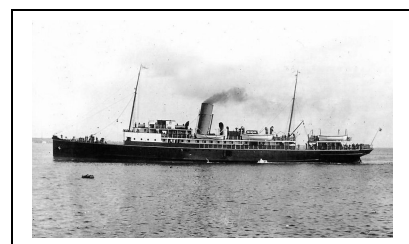
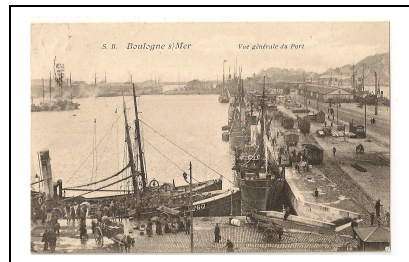
\* \* \* \* \*

Some seven months earlier On March 7, 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion had 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 Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine.

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

(continued)



Those Pioneers fortunate enough to have boarded *Caesarea* then, upon arrival in Le Havre, were to spend the remainder of the day in a rest camp; if otherwise, they were to spend the next number of hours unloading everything that *Maidan* carried.



(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 in the morning of March 10.

The work of a pioneer battalion was unlike that of a regular battalion. The Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion had been attached to the Canadian 2<sup>nd</sup> Division upon its arrival on the Continent in that March of 1916 and thus had been stationed in Belgium with the Division during the earlier days of its war.

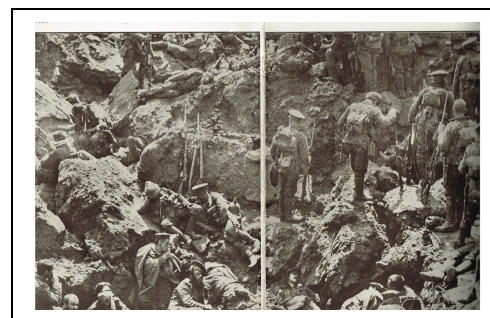
Pioneer Battalions were responsible for the construction, the repair, and the improvement of such things as trenches, dugouts, wiring, drainage, sanitary facilities, roads and the like\*. It was hard work and undoubtedly the personnel was chosen, from amongst other attributes, each man for his physique and also for his experience in such work. Often 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... ‘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 were disbanded, many of those former Pioneers were transferred to Engineer units.*

There were times also when the Pioneers were obliged to act as regular infantry. On March 27, ‘B’ and ‘C’ Companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion, during the British 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: *Perhaps staged, described as a photograph of the aftermath of an action subsequent to the detonation of a mine, as at St-Éloi – from *Le Miroir* or *Illustration**)

(continued)



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 perhaps not un-typical day for 'C' Company: *Finished the excavation of 7 dugouts, dug the entry trench to the 8<sup>th</sup> dugout, drained the 9<sup>th</sup> dugout, filled 2500 sandbags. Filled in the straight trench at the traverse. Returned to camp at 2.30 a.m.*

Dickebusch is today still a small community to the south of the city of Ypres. In 1916, during the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion's tenure there, it had likely been evacuated. Certainly little of it remained standing. In the vicinity of Dickebusch was Camp 'A', in a rear area, but well within the range of German artillery so the War Diarist reports. The Camp became the base for the Battalion from the first days of April until the middle of June when it moved to Micmac Camp which, if not adjacent to, was close enough to Camp 'A' that work on the same projects was being continued.

During that period, from June 2 to 14, 1916, was fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood*. *Hooge, Maple Copse, Railway Dugouts* 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*)

(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*)



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. However, their line still held.

The end came on June 13 when the Canadians attacked after a ten-hour artillery barrage. They regained the positions which had been lost on the first day of the battle, June 2, and so, as the engagement closed, both sides – apart from a small loss to the Germans in the *Hooge Sector* – ended up where they had begun: status quo.



(continued)

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

It had been the newly-arrived Canadian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division which had borne the brunt of the German onslaught. And although a number of other units had been called forward to serve *in extremis*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion had not been one of them. It had remained busy constructing defences in the area of nearby Voormezeele during that period and, in fact, was to continue to do so – and to remain in Micmac Camp – until the last week of August.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of that month, the unit marched to a training area in the vicinity of the northern French commune of Serques, itself some eight kilometres to the north of the larger centre of St-Omer. The training continued until September 4 when, in two separate detachments, the Battalion boarded trains which carried both parties southwards towards the French *Département de la Somme*.

On the following day, September 5, the two detachments, from their respective detraining stations, arrived on foot at Ribeaucourt where... *The inhabitants...did not like the soldiers being with them. They had probably not been well treated by previous bodies of troops.* (2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion War Diary)

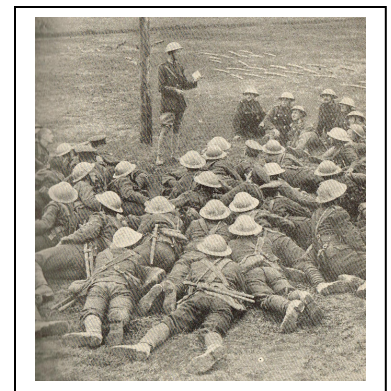
The Battalion marched out of Ribeaucourt on the morrow at seven o'clock in the morning. Four of the following five days were to be spent on foot, moving toward the large military Brickfields Camp (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert. From there it was but a short distance to the forward area and to the front lines themselves.

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 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which had lost so heavily on that day at Beaumont-Hamel.

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), 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.

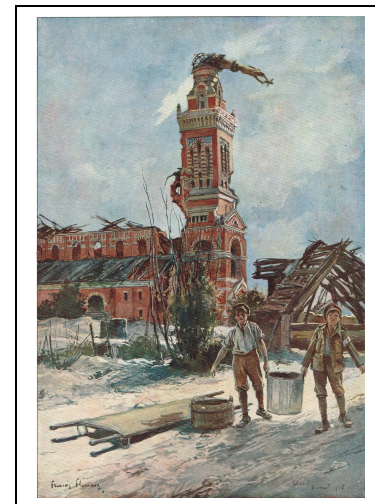
(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcellette, September 1916. – from The War Illustrated*)



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One entry from a Canadian Battalion War Diary – not that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion – makes mention of first impressions of the town of Albert that the Canadians came to know well: *The town was deserted, as regards its civil population, with the exception of a few who had ventured back to cater to the troops who chanced to be billeted there. The Church, a pleasing structure of pressed red brick and fine building stone, very badly battered by the enemy heavy guns. Surmounting the lofty spire is the figure of the Virgin with the Child in Her arms. This at some time, had received a direct hit at its Base and is now leaning over at an angle of 120 degrees, as if to take a headlong dive to earth. – it is almost poetry.*



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

(Right below: 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*)

September 15 had been the day on which the Canadians attacked in the area of the ruined villages of Flers and of Courcellette. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion had been ordered into the forward assembly points before zero hour and was to advance with the fighting troops to repair routes, build new strong-points, lay cables, dig new access trenches, lay trench tram-lines, erect marking-posts and, at times, to act as stretcher-bearers.



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

Some of this work, leading up to the starting-points of September 15, had already been under way by that time. The Battalion found itself continually employed during the days of the offensive itself and then, subsequently, for the weeks afterwards – all the time attracting the attention of the enemy guns. It was not to be until October 3 that the War Diarist was able to record... *Battalion commenced rest period.*



There was, it goes without saying, still work to be done in the rest area – one of the least gratifying days surely being October 7 spent in constructing latrines – but at least the unit was no longer being shot at. And on October 8, it began a retirement from the area. Moving at first in a westerly direction, the Battalion then turned northwards to pass behind the city of Arras and some twenty-five kilometres beyond, to arrive in the commune of Ruitz on October 13 of that 1916.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the next day, October 14, the day of Lieutenant Collins' arrival – although the Battalion War Diary appears to make no mention of *that* event - the unit was already billeted in or close to the community of Ruitz – some of the men lodged even in the local chateau.

Lieutenant Collins is first noted in the Battalion War Diary entry for October 21 which partially reads as follows: *Fosse\* 10 – Party under Lieut. Collins worked patrolling and repairing TAMWORTH and MORGAN TRENCHES.*

*\*The word 'fosse' in French in this case signifies a mine pit or workings.*

It was the practice to encourage soldiers leaving – or failing that, once having left - on overseas service or active service to allot a certain daily, weekly or monthly amount from their pay to a beneficiary of their choice. Lieutenant Collins elected to allocate a monthly twenty-five dollars to a W.G. Gaden of 37, Clomedy Street in Montreal; no further details appear to have been recorded.

It was also practice to encourage the writing of a will even though many of the less well-off soldiers had precious little to leave. Lieutenant Collins chose to write the following:

2<sup>nd</sup> Cdn Pioneers

Jan 3, '17

Sir: - I have the honour to state that I have not made a will and do not wish to do so in the future.

I have the honour to be, Sir

Your obedient servant,

Frank A. (sic) Collins

Lieut.

Capt. J.F. Waddington.

Paymaster.

For the remainder of the year of 1916 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion was employed in the area of Fosse 10 in the outskirts of Lens. The War Diarist found little to write about during these weeks, repeating on multiple occasions... *Work carried on as usual.* No further note was made of Lieutenant Collins, at least not by name\*.



(Above right: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during 1917: in fact, the photograph was taken in the year 1915, at a time when the French were responsible for the sector – from Le Miroir*)

*\*Not, it seems, until July 23 of 1917 when he is recorded as being with "A" Company. But whether he was with this Company all the while from October, 1916, until July 23 of 1917 is not clear.*



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*)

In mid-January of 1917, Lieutenant Collins' unit was ordered to retire to the *training area*. There were obviously several such locations, but the one to which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion eventually reported at the end of the month was in the area of the community of Lozinghem, an area which was also the temporary home of a number of military medical facilities.

Two weeks later the Battalion was on the move once more, on this occasion southward to Écoivres and Mont St-Éloy, still behind the lines but yet close enough for the German artillery to inflict several casualties. It was also close enough for work parties to be sent out each and every day of the month of March - and for the casualty list to increase.



(Right above and right: *The village of 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*)

The work at the time included not only repairs and improvements to the trench system, but such things as construction of a light railway, erection of huts, consolidation of new artillery positions, the establishment of a dressing station and the excavation of underground facilities.



Whether the Battalion War Diarist was completely unaware of the purpose of all the ongoing preparations or whether he was ordered not to speculate upon it is of course not known. Whatever the case, it was not until April 8 that he made the following entry: *Instructions having been received that the Canadian Corps would attack at 5:30 a.m. with the object of capturing VIMY RIDGE...*

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Pioneer Division was allotted four tasks. “A” Company was allotted the task of extending the Mow Cop Spur of the Tram line towards Les Tilleuls. “B” Company was allotted the task of opening up and repairing the Neuville St-Vaast - Thelus Road. “C” Company was allotted the task of burying the Northern Cable. “D” Company was allotted the task of burying the Southern Cable\*.

***\*These were communication cables which would have to advance behind the attacking troops across No-Man's-Land and into the positions to be won from the Germans.***

On that April 9 of 1917 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.

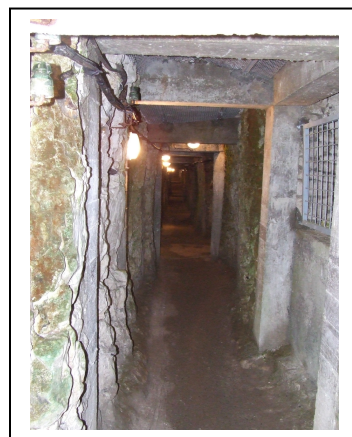


While the British campaign proved to be an overall disappointment, the French offensive was a disaster.

***(Above right: the Canadian National Memorial which, since 1936, stands 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, stormed the slope of Vimy Ridge, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

***(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 4<sup>th</sup> or the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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)***



By the evening of April 10, Vimy Ridge was just about entirely in Canadian hands. Unfortunately, however, the remainder of the relatively short, five-week long, *Battle of Arras* was not to be fought in the manner of the first two days. Fearful of German counter-attacks, the High Command did not – and up to a point in all fairness, *could* not – exploit the momentary disarray in the German ranks. Orders were given to hold the positions taken and to consolidate. By the end of those subsequent five weeks, little else had changed and the Germans had recovered from the initial Canadian success.

The work for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion nevertheless continued: “D” Company was the first to complete its initial task by April 12 and thus turned its hand to road repair; “C” Company did likewise two days later, on the 14<sup>th</sup>; “B” Company, on April 16, began to work... *filling in dis-used trenches, shell holes etc., and preparing dry-weather wagon track and mule path... They also salvaged some material.*

(continued)



**“A” Company, on the other hand, was to continue the construction of that light-railway system, the work apparently still ongoing until as late as May 12.**

**(Right: A light railway-line in the throes of construction at Vimy Ridge – while the battle is still being fought – and at the same time being used for the evacuation of some of the wounded – from Illustration)**



**The entire 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion continued work of this ilk until the end of the month of May when the War Diarist reports it as relieved by the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Pioneer Battalion. The unit had been labouring continually for fifty-two days. During that time it had incurred a total of five-hundred eighteen casualties – killed in action, wounded and missing in action.**

**The first half of the month of June was spent in another training area, close to the community of Comblain L’Abbé. The Battalion was next ordered to Ablain St-Nazaire where the emphasis was now the construction of strong-points. Little contact with the enemy was reported during this period, except that the Germans retreated in some places, presumably to previously-prepared defensive positions.**



**The work for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pioneer Battalion nevertheless reportedly... carried on as usual.**

**(Right above: Canadian troops in the Lens Sector during the summer of 1917 and showing the conditions under which the Canadian Pioneers were obliged to work – from Le Miroir or Illustration)**

**On July 6... Battalion received orders to move into woods at AIX NOULETTE. In the near proximity and just to the west of the city of Lens, the unit was to remain in the Bois de Noulette (Noulette Wood) for some seven weeks, until August 23.**

**This events of the latter part of this posting, alas, were to be of little concern to Lieutenant Collins.**

**The entry in the Battalion War Diary for July 23 reads partially as follows: “A” Company, 2 Officers and 171 O.R. worked on CORKSCREW trench... Lieut. F.P. Collins, in charge of this party, was wounded by shrapnel and died the same morning. He was buried in the afternoon at AIX NOULETTE Military Cemetery...**



**(continued)**

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

Having been wounded, Lieutenant Collins had been evacuated to the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance established at Fosse 10. The Field Ambulance records of the day, however, document no officer dying while receiving treatment. Thus it may be that Lieutenant Collins was already dead upon arrival at the Field Ambulance and his demise accordingly reported, but separately from the Field Ambulance's own statistics.

The son of John Robert Collins, lobster fisherman and official for His Majesty's Customs (apparently deceased between the time of his son's enlistment and the date of the 1921 census), and of Elizabeth Collins (née *Bruce*) of Jersey-side, Placentia, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Francis (died aged eight months), to James-Joseph\*, John-Joseph\*\*, Sarah-Joseph, Albert and to Cyril.

Lieutenant Collins was reported by the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Field Ambulance as having *died of wounds* on July 23, 1917.

*\*His brother, Private James Joseph Collins, No. 567 of the Newfoundland Regiment, had been killed in action some three months earlier, on April 14, 1917, during the fighting at Monchy-le-Preux. He has no known last resting-place and is thus commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel. (See elsewhere in these documents.)*



(Right below: *The sacrifice of Lieutenant Collins and of Private Collins is honoured on the Placentia War Memorial – photographs from 2013*)

*\*\*Various documented as Sapper and Driver, John Joseph Collins as a driver served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Section of the 5<sup>th</sup> (Canadian) Division Ammunition Column at Witley Camp in the English county of Surrey. Unless he was transferred to another Division – and no such move is recorded - Driver (Sapper) Collins did not see action on the Continent, as the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division remained in England.*



Lieutenant Frank Peter Collins died at the age of twenty-five years: date of birth at Placentia, Newfoundland, August 1, 1892.

Lieutenant Frank Peter Collins 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.**