

Private Alfred Benedict Costello*(Number 151587) of the 27th Battalion (City of Winnipeg) Canadian Infantry, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

****The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records his middle name as Benedick but elsewhere – parish records – there is the more likely Benedict. His family name is also documented in older files as Costelloe.***



(Right above: The image of the 27th Battalion (City of Winnipeg) shoulder-patch is from the Wikipedia web-site.)

His occupation prior to his military service recorded as that of a *miner*, Albert Benedict Costello appears to have left no records of his movement from the Dominion of Newfoundland to the Canadian province of Manitoba, except on his attestation papers which document his place of residence at the time as Brandon.

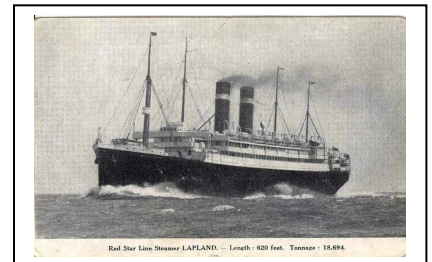
His first pay records show that it was on November 15 of 1915 that he enlisted in Brandon and that on the same day he underwent a medical examination which found him to be...fit for the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force. On that same November 15 Private Costello was officially *taken on strength* by the 79th Overseas Battalion (*Manitoba*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was also attested, his oath witnessed by a local Justice of the Peace*.

**This official has dated his certification as having occurred on November 6 instead of the more logical November 16.*

The formalities of his enlistment and attestation were brought to a conclusion four days later by the Officer Commanding the 79th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel George Clingan, who on November 19 declared – on paper – that...*Alfred Benedict Costello...having been approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

As the winter was now descending upon Manitoba, although in the better weather the battalion was to train at the tented *Sewell Camp* some two hundred kilometres to the west of Winnipeg, it appears that the 79th Battalion and Private Costello were now to be prepare for overseas service at the Brandon Armoury – apart from the total of eleven days that he was to spend in hospital on three separate occasions – sprained knee, diarrhoea and a common cold – between then and Christmas.

It was to be some five months after his enlistment, on April 24 of 1916, that the 79th Battalion, having travelled by train across half the country, embarked onto His Majesty's Transport *Lapland* in the harbour at Halifax for passage to the United Kingdom. On board was not only Private Costello's unit but also the Second Draft of the 58th Battalion as well as the entire 70th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry, a total of some three-thousand five-hundred military passengers in all.



The vessel from Halifax sailed on the morrow, April 25, to dock in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool ten days later, on May 5. From there his unit was transported by rail to the south-east to continue to train, on this occasion to Canadian military facilities in the county of Kent.

(Right above: The photograph of the SS Lapland is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries website. During the first three years of the Great War, chartered to the Cunard Line, she served on the Liverpool-New York commercial route, but taking on military personnel when the need arose and if space was available. She was later requisitioned as a troop-transport in June of 1917, serving as such until the war's end.)

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Apparently, after three weeks in England, Private Costello was awarded the penalty of seven days of Field Punishment Number 2 for having created a disturbance. The files do not allow us any further details of the incident except to record that the date was May 26, and that he was stationed at East Sandling at the time.

East Sandling was a part of the Canadian complex by then established at *Shorncliffe*, close to the English-Channel town of Folkestone in the aforementioned English county of Kent and it was almost certainly from Folkestone that Private Costello – as a soldier in a re-enforcement draft from England - sailed on June 28, 1916, to join his new battalion on the Continent. This new unit was to be the 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) to which he had been transferred from the 79th Battalion on the same June 28.



(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 top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)



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

The French port of Boulogne is only some two hours sailing-time distant from Folkestone so it was in all likelihood there that Private Costello set foot on French soil. Not that he would have had long to appreciate his new surroundings as he is documented as being *taken on strength* at the Canadian General Base Depot of *Rouelles Camp* situated in the vicinity of Le Havre on the next day, June 29.



The industrial port-city of Le Havre is situated on the estuary of the River Seine on France’s west coast and Private Costello and his draft would have made the two-hundred fifty-kilometre journey from Boulogne to there by train. There he was to remain for two weeks before being ordered to join the parent unit of the 27th Battalion *in the field* on July 12 – which he is documented as having done on the following day, July 13, 1916.



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

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The personnel of the parent unit of the 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) had sailed from Canada – from the port at Québec City – on May 15 of 1915, six months before Alfred Benedict Costello’s enlistment. The ship on which it had travelled, *Carpathia**, had docked in the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport on May 28 and, on the day following, the Battalion had been transported to one of the camps at *Shorncliffe*.

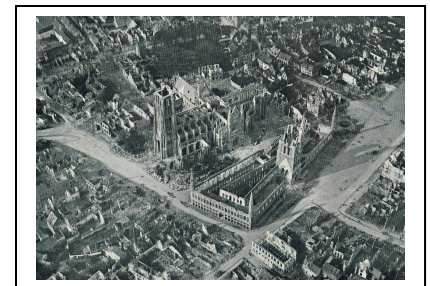
**The ship’s claim to fame had been that in April of 1912, she had raced through ice-strewn seas for some four hours and had rescued some seven-hundred fifty survivors of the Titanic disaster. Towards the end of the Great War, in July of 1918, she herself would be sunk, torpedoed by a German U-boat with the loss of five lives.*

Stationed at *Shorncliffe* until the middle of September of 1915, the unit had then sailed from Folkestone on the 17th of that month and had disembarked in Boulogne at two-thirty in the morning of the 18th. From there it was to be transported by train eastwards and then north to a camp in the vicinity of the Commune of St-Sylvestre, and close to the Franco-Belgian border. The remainder of the transfer was to be made on foot.



(Right above: *Troops – in this case likely British – on the move either in or towards Belgium in the early days of the Great War. Canadian units – apart from distinguishing badges and flashes – were to wear the same uniforms and, apart from their rifles and machine-guns (both later to be replaced) – would use much the same equipment. – from a vintage post-card*)

At this early period of the *Great War*, Canadian troops arriving in France were to be despatched immediately upon arrival towards the areas of the Franco-Belgian frontier. At one time or another, all were eventually to be stationed in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, either in the *Ypres Salient*, a region which was to prove one of the most lethal theatres of the entire *Great War*, or in the sectors leading southwards from the city to the frontier with France. The 27th Battalion had been stationed at a distance of some five to six kilometres south of Ypres in the *St. Eloy sub-Sector*.



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

The 27th Battalion (*City of Winnipeg*) was a component of the Canadian 6th Infantry Brigade, which itself was an element of the Canadian 2nd Division, just newly-formed in England by that September of 1915 and, as seen above, had been posted to the area of St-Éloi south of the battered city of Ypres.

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The 1st Canadian Division – the first military formation to leave Canada - had been in the *Ypres Salient* since February of 1915 and had distinguished itself in that April during the *Second Battle of Ypres*. However, this particular confrontation had taken place months before the arrival of the 2nd Canadian Division which now had to settle down to the business of the daily routines and rigours of trench warfare*.

**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, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.*



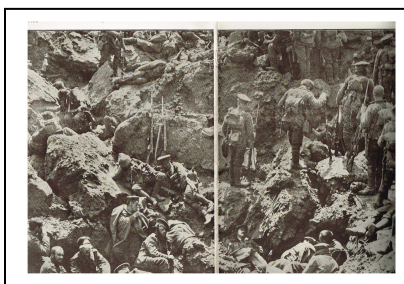
Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: 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)

It was to be more than six months before the 2nd Canadian Division – and thus the 27th Battalion – would be plunged into its first major conflagration, although of course that is not to say that there had not been a steady number of casualties incurred during that period – the majority due to enemy artillery and to snipers.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* was to take place *officially* from March 27 until April 17 of that spring of 1916. St-Éloi was a small village some five kilometres to the south of the Belgian city of Ypres and it had been here that the British were to excavate a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place a series of explosives which they would detonate on that March 27. It had been followed by an infantry assault.

After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were to be replacing the by-then exhausted British troops. They had enjoyed no more success than had their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th of that April, when the battle would *officially* eventually be terminated, the Germans were to be back where they had been some three weeks previously and the Canadians had incurred some fifteen-hundred casualties.



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

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Ironically, it had been the success of the explosions which were to be the principal cause of the failure of the British-Canadian venture. The weather at the time had been vile and it had rained much of the time. The craters created by the detonations had filled with water so as to become impassable, the explosions had also rendered the landscape unrecognizable and there had remained few viable paths and tracks.

The troops were to fight for days standing in water up to the knees – at times up to the waist – and had gone nowhere.

It had been on April 3 that the 27th Battalion was to be ordered forward...to take over trenches in front of St. Éloi. By the 7th, when the unit would eventually be relieved by the 21st Canadian Infantry Battalion, it had incurred two-hundred thirty *killed, wounded and missing in action*. Many of the unit's losses were to be due to the German artillery fire which had grown ever heavier as the days had passed.

During the fighting at the *St-Éloi Craters* the casualty count of the 2nd Canadian Division, as noted above, was to be in total some fifteen hundred. And as quite often transpired during the *Great War*, it had all been for very, very little.

Thus the 27th Battalion was to return to the daily drudgery of trench warfare. Some seven weeks of that uncomfortable and at times precarious life in and out of the trenches were then to pass before the enemy had made any further serious attempt to break the deadlock at Ypres.

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

That attempt had come about from June 2 to 13 during which time was to be fought the battle for *Mount Sorrel* and for the area of *Sanctuary Wood*, the village of *Hooge*, *Railway Dugouts* and *Hill 60* between the German Army and the Canadian Corps. The Canadians had apparently been preparing an attack of their own on the enemy positions dominating the Canadian trenches when the Germans had delivered an offensive, overrunning the forward areas and, in fact, rupturing the Canadian lines, an opportunity which fortunately they were never to exploit.



The British Commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng, had reacted – perhaps a little too precipitately - by organizing a counter-attack on the following day, an assault intended to, at a minimum, recapture the lost ground. Badly organized, the operation had been a horrendous experience, many of the intended attacks had never gone in; those that *had*, had been delivered piecemeal and the assaulting troops had been cut to pieces.



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

The enemy was to remain in his captured Canadian positions and the attackers had been left to count an extremely heavy casualty list.

(Right below: *Maple Copse Cemetery, adjacent to Hill 60, in which lie many Canadians killed during the days of the confrontation at Mount Sorrel – photograph from 2014*)

On the day of the German attack the 27th Battalion had been in Reserve at “B” Camp and recovering from the exertions of the baseball and football games – and the band concert - of the previous day.



It had not been until June 6 that the unit would be ordered forward, at first into Ypres itself before then being divided to undertake various tasks, one of which had been to take defensive positions to oppose another German assault launched that day.

On the 7th and 8th the Battalion was to be in support; from the 9th until one o'clock in the morning of the 12th, it had been up in the forward trenches before it was to be ordered back once more into support positions. On the evening of that same day, other units had moved up into assembly positions to deliver a massive counter-attack – on this occasion better-organized and also well-supported by the Canadian guns – early on the following morning.



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

(Right: *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*)



****In the first week of June, 1917, on the opening day of the ‘Battle of Messines Ridge’, a British mine underneath it was detonated and removed any resemblance to a hill.***

The counter-stroke of June 13 had proved successful. After the previous eleven days of what at times had been ferocious fighting, apart from a small Canadian loss to the Germans of ground in the area of Hooge, the two opposing forces were now to find themselves returned much to their original positions of June 2. And there the matter would draw to a close: status quo – except that the cemeteries were now more full and more numerous.

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Thus the days had again reverted to that trench warfare routine which was to continue for some two further months. After this time the 27th Battalion – in the company of most of the other Canadian Battalions – was once more to be withdrawn, on this occasion for intensive training in ‘*open warfare*’ in one of several large areas that had been prepared for the task in the north-west of France. From there the Canadians were then to be ordered further south into France, there to play a role in the British summer offensive of 1916.

Well before that time, of course, Private Costello had reported *to duty* with his new unit. The 27th Battalion, according to its War Diary, had been serving a tour in the forward area on the recorded July 13 and there is no mention made by the War Diarist of any reinforcements arriving on that particular day – however, there appears to be no mention of them in any *other* entry for that month either. In any case Private Costello’s draft was hardly likely to have reported directly from the Base Depot at Le Havre to the front-line trenches – probably to Details or to Transport in the rear area.

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The weeks following Private Costello’s arrival were to be quiet, a goodly number of the days in July spent at *Chippewa Camp* behind the forward areas in close proximity to the small community of La Clytte and it was not until the last day of that month that his Battalion were to leave a lengthy period in reserve to serve a final tour in the front-line positions.



(Right: *La Clytte Military Cemetery within the bounds of which are buried some eight-hundred fifty dead of the Great War, including fifty who wore a Canadian uniform – photograph from 2017*)

The trenches in question were once more in the area of St-Éloi where, on the night of August 4-5, the Battalion was to play a role in a minor raid on enemy positions in order to either take a prisoner or to identify the German unit opposite – or both. However, even though the enemy trenches had been entered and several of the enemy killed or wounded, no prisoner was forthcoming nor were any insignia to identify the unit.

A second such enterprise was undertaken on the night of August 7-8 but on this occasion the only enemy positions that the attackers had been able to enter were found to have been abandoned.

What Private Costello’s part in all of this, if indeed he was to play a part, has not been recorded.

This tour in the forward area proved to be longer than usual and it was not to be until August 16 that the 27th Battalion retired from to return to *Chippewa Camp*. There the unit was to spend the next three days in preparation for its departure from the sector – indeed from the country – and a return into north-western France. On August 20 Private Costello’s Battalion was on the march by a circuitous itinerary towards the vicinity of Hazebrouck via the community of Steenvoorde where it had been billeted for that night.

It was now for the 27th Battalion, after a day of rest, and for other battalions of the 2nd Canadian Division that those aforementioned training exercises in ‘open warfare’ were to begin on or about August 22 – with the new Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle (see below).

(Right below: *Canadian troops likely in trenches built for training purposes – they are too prim and proper to be the real thing when compared to the photograph on a following page – and here equipped with Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles, during the late summer or early autumn of 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)

**The Canadian-produced Ross Rifle was an excellently-manufactured weapon; its accuracy and range were superior to that of many of its rivals, but on the battlefield it had not proved its worth. In the dirty conditions and when the necessity arose for its repeated use - and using mass-produced ammunition which at times was less than perfect - it would jam, leaving its user defenceless at a critical moment.*



By the summer of 1916 the Canadian units were exchanging it for the more reliable British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III, a weapon that was to ultimately serve around the globe until well after the Second World War.

In the case of the 27th Battalion, those training exercises in ‘open warfare’ began as of August 17 in the area of the community of Hazebrouck in northern France. Then, on September 4, Private Costello and his unit boarded a train in the larger centre of St-Omer.

(Right: *The once-splendid railway station in St-Omer, which today is in dire need of some overdue attention – photograph from 2015*)

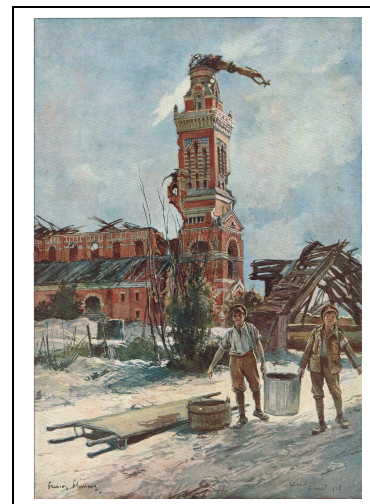


Apparently the... *Train moved out at 2.03 pm on time. The Battalion subsequently... arrived and detrained at CANDAS at 2.15 am... some twelve hours later, whereupon the Canadians were obliged to march four miles... where Battalion billeted.*

More marching was to follow, from their billets to the camp at Brickfields (*la Briqueterie*) in close proximity to the provincial town of Albert, a distance – on country roads – of some forty kilometres, where the Battalion reported on September 7.

There Private Costello and his comrades-in-arms were again to train during the next week.

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



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By that 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 costing the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – during the short span of only four hours -of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

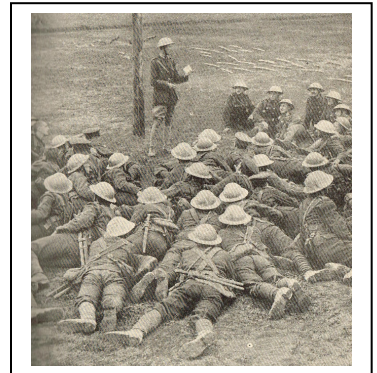
On that first day of *First Somme* all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, the exceptions having been the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland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

As the battle had progressed, other troops, from the Empire (*Commonwealth*), were to be 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 collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcellette.



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

(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 (see below), September 1916 – from The War Illustrated*)



(Extract from 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade War Diary entry for September 15) *At 6.20 a.m. the Brigade carried out attack against German line, with 27th and 28th Bns. as assaulting Bns.*

The Canadian attackers of September 15 were to be assisted by three tanks, the first time that these new weapons would be used in battle.

(Right below: *One of the earliest tanks built during the Great War, today on display at the Imperial War Museum in London – photograph from 2011(?)*)

Extract from Battalion War Diary of September 15: *At 6.20 a.m. the artillery barrage opened, 50 yards in advance of German trench and the first wave commenced crawling over.*

As the barrage lifted the Battn. advanced on to the first German Line and were met with heavy rifle and machine gun fire... This objective was reported to Battn. H.Q. as being taken at 6.27 a.m. The Battn. followed up the barrage closely and met very little opposition at SUNKEN ROAD...



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By this time the first wave was nearly wiped out and the second wave took its place. "A" Company then swung to the left and captured its last objective with one Corpl. and 15 O.R. "C" and "D" Coys. reached their objectives and immediately commenced to dig in. This was reported to Battn. H.Q. at 7.40 a.m.



(Right above: After the fighting of Courcellette, lightly-wounded Canadian soldiers being administered first aid before being evacuated to the rear for further medical attention – from Le Miroir)

The day was, in fact, to be an overall mixture of success, mostly Canadian, and failure – and a heavy toll was paid: the 27th Battalion incurred three-hundred ninety-four casualties all told; the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade counted one-thousand one-hundred twenty-nine in total.



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

(Right below: The village of Courcellette seen from the north a century after the events of the First Battle of the Somme – photograph from 2017)

At first reported as wounded, Private Costello was then declared, also on September 15, 1916, to be missing in action during the fighting of the day at Courcellette. However, a later casualty report dated November 7, 1917, reads as follows: 'Previously for official purposes presumed Dead*, now reported Killed in Action – in the attack on Courcellette.' There appears to have been no reason offered for the amendment.



The son of Daniel Costello (also Costelloe), fisherman, and of Mary Costello (née Hickey) of Harbour Main, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Patrick, to Daniel and to Hanora (Nora)-Mary – she later of 63, Duckworth Street, St. John's.

Alfred Benedict Costello had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-four years and nine months: date of birth in Harbour Main, Newfoundland, as recorded on attestation papers, December 24, 1891. But a copy of the Harbour Main Parish Records cites December 16, 1890, as the date – then records his baptism a month prior to that, on November 19, 1890.

***This also on a document dated September 18, 1917**

Private Alfred Benedict Costello 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 23, 2023.