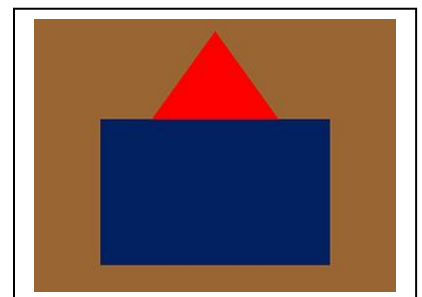


Private Joseph Cox (Number 878263) of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated in the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: The image of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) shoulder flash is from the Wikipedia Web-site.)



(continued)

His occupations prior to military service recorded as those of both labourer and *tailor* (or the perhaps more likely *sailor*), Joseph Cox cited his address at the time of his enlistment as still being Harbour Breton, Newfoundland. This may suggest that he made the journey to North Sydney – perhaps on a private ship as he does not figure on any passenger list of the time – for the sole purpose of joining up.

He is recorded as having enlisted in North Sydney, Cape Breton, on March 16 of 1916*, before then making the short journey to the town of Broughton**, some twenty kilometres distant to the south of the industrial centre of Sydney.

**The date and place of enlistment is confirmed by his pay records and an appendix to his medical file which also document him as having been taken on strength on that same date, March 16, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

***Broughton was a ‘company town’, developed towards the end on the nineteenth century by the Cape Breton Coal, Iron & Railway Company. Apparently too much money was spent as the company went bankrupt in 1907 and the town was soon abandoned. At the outset of the Great War it was taken over by the Canadian Army and, more particularly, by the 185th Battalion (Cape Breton Highlanders).*

It was at Broughton that Private Cox underwent medical examination and also attested, both on April 13*. The official conclusion to the formalities of his enlistment was then brought about on April 26 when, on that date, the Officer Commanding the 185th Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Parker-Day, declared – on paper – that... *having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

The posting to Broughton was then to last just over a further month: By that time, the authorities had decided to create a Nova Scotia Highland Brigade to comprise the 185th, the 85th, the 193rd and the 219th Battalions. On May 23 of 1915 these four formations were assembled* to train together at Camp Aldershot, Nova Scotia, where the Brigade then spent all summer before receiving its colours on September 28, two weeks before its departure for overseas service.

**The 185th Battalion apparently travelled by train to Camp Aldershot on May 26.*

It was while at Aldershot that Private Cox was to write his will, on August 23, a document on which he bequeathed his everything to a friend, a Miss Adline (sic) M. White of Stephenville, Newfoundland.

The 185th Battalion embarked for overseas service at seven o'clock in the evening of October 11, 1916, in the harbour at Halifax. The ship was His Majesty's Transport *Olympic*, sister-ship of *Britannic*, to be sunk by a mine in the Mediterranean a month later, and also of the ill-starred *Titanic*.



Olympic was to carry not only the one-thousand thirty-eight personnel of the 185th Battalion, but also the 85th, the 188th, the 219th, and the 193rd Battalions of Canadian Infantry as well as a part of the 166th Battalion.

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

With the addition of some three-hundred miscellaneous others who also took passage on her, the vessel was to provide accomodation to the United Kingdom for about six-thousand five-hundred souls. She eventually cleared the port of Halifax at eleven o'clock in the morning of that October 13. Six days later, on October 19*, she docked in the English west-coast port-city of Liverpool.

****A second source has her arriving on the 18th.***

Apparently it was during that October, perhaps even while on board *Olympic* – October 16 is noted but without any further details – that Private Cox ran afoul of the Battalion authorities. He was sentenced to forfeit three days' pay and also to be detained for one-hundred sixty-eight hours – one week, some of which was subsequently remitted – for a seemingly unrecorded misdemeanour.

The War Diarist of the 185th Battalion (*Cape Breton Highlanders*) puts pen to paper – in fact he used a typewriter – only as of January 1 of 1917. But the impression is that the Battalion was already well established by that time in the military camp, Witley, in the English county of Surrey. It was, in fact, to Witley that Private Cox's unit had been transported immediately after its disembarkation in Liverpool.

But it was not until May 17 of 1917 that *active service* on the Continent became imminent for Private Cox. On May 17, the order was... *received to despatch 270 men to 25th Canadian Battalion and 30 men to Royal Canadian Regiment.*

The order was duly carried out on May 27... *Drafts ordered on 17th instant leaves Camp for Overseas at 2.00 a.m. Resultant strength of Battalion 666. Weather fine. As of that date, Private Cox was a soldier of the 25th Battalion and was off to France on active service.*

There appears no clue in his papers of from which English port Private Cox sailed, or where he landed in France. All that is documented is that he reported to one of the four newly-established Canadian Infantry Base Depots in the proximity of the French coastal community of Étapes on May 28.

****It was likely the 2nd as the 25th Battalion was a 2nd Division unit.***

There he remained *on strength* for some two weeks until despatched – the date not recorded - to join his unit *in the field* which he did on June 16, according to his personal file.

(Right: *Little remains as a reminder of the Great War at Étapes apart from the cemetery and its almost eleven-thousand dead - Étapes was at the time an important medical centre. – photograph from 2010*)



* * * * *

The parent unit of the 25th Battalion (*Nova Scotia Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had already been serving in France and Belgium for some twenty-one months by this time, since September of 1915.

The 25th Battalion was a unit of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself an element of the 2nd Canadian Division, whose troops, within weeks of their arrival on the Continent, had been posted to a sector of the line just to the south of the remnants of the medieval city of Ypres, between it and the Franco-Belgian frontier. There, during the subsequent seven or so months, the officers and men of the 25th Battalion were to experience the everyday rigours and routines of life in the trenches of the Western Front*.

**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.

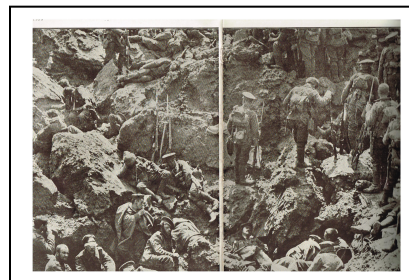
(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of, 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets – and the less visible British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III rifles – from Illustration)

It was not to be until the month of April, 1916, that the 25th Battalion was to be engaged in its first major infantry action of the *Great War*.

The *Action at the St. Eloi Craters* officially took place 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 was here that the British had excavated a series of galleries under the German lines, there to place explosives which they detonated on that March 27. It was immediately followed by an infantry assault.

The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

Ironically, it was the success of the explosions which had been the cause of the failure of the British-Canadian venture. The weather at the time was vile and it rained continually. The craters created by the detonations had filled with water and become impassable; they had also rendered the landscape unrecognizable and the few viable paths and tracks impassable. The troops fought for days standing in water up to the knees – at times up to the waist – and went nowhere.



After an initial success the attack had soon bogged down and by April 4 the Canadians were replacing the by-then exhausted British troops.

(Preceding page: *A purported attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines* – from Illustration)

On April 13 and 14 the 25th Battalion had become involved, although not to the extent as had some other of its fellow units. Towards the end of the confrontation it had manned forward craters and trenches in relief of another battalion and during those two days had incurred a total of some eighty-five casualties, a greater toll than the Battalion had suffered during any single action up until that date. After this short-lived posting it had been withdrawn.

The Canadians were to have no more success than had had their British comrades-in-arms, and by the 17th, when the battle was called off, the Germans were back where they had been some three weeks previously.

Then, some seven weeks later, in early June, the 25th Battalion had been involved in the fighting in the area of *Mount Sorrel, Sanctuary Wood, Hooge, Railway Dugouts, Hill 60* and *Maple Copse*, all just to the south-east of the city of Ypres. The Canadian 3rd Division had been the main recipient of the enemy's offensive thrust but the 25th Battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division had played a role sufficiently important for the name *Mount Sorrel* to become the first battle honour won by the unit during the Great War*.



**It had held the forward trenches at Zillebeke for three days.*

(Right above: *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)

Subsequently, from the middle of the month of June up until August 27 of 1916, the 25th Battalion had been in reserve well to the rear, so well to the rear, in fact, that it had been deemed safe enough for His Majesty the King and his son the Prince of Wales to pay a visit on August 14.

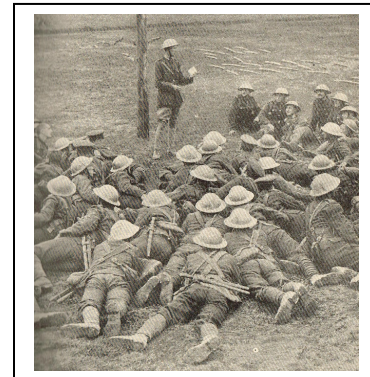
Some two weeks after that event, the unit was withdrawn into northern France to the vicinity of Steenvoorde and to the village of Moule. There the following week was spent in becoming familiar with the British Lee-Enfield Mark III rifle which was replacing the Canadian-made Ross rifle, and in training for a Canadian role in the British summer campaign of 1916, an offensive which to that date had not been proceeding precisely to plan.



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

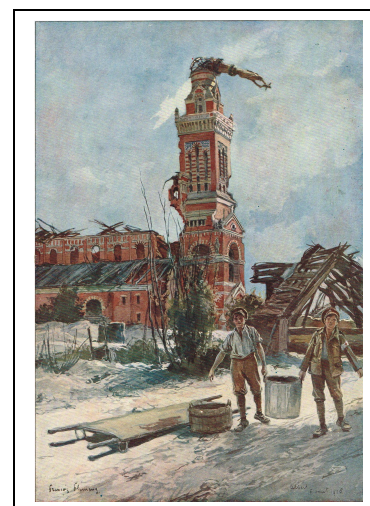
By that September of 1916, the *First Battle of the Somme* had been ongoing for two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties - in the short space of only four hours – and of which some nineteen thousand had been killed.

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



On that first day of *1st Somme*, all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been troops from the British Isles, those exceptions being the two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and those of the *1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment* which was to lose so heavily 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 Courcelette*.



Meanwhile, by the evening of September 10 the *25th Battalion* had been transferred south, to the large military camp which had been established at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)* in close proximity to the provincial town of *Albert*.

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

On the morrow the *25th Battalion* had been ordered forward into dug-outs in assembly areas. On the next morning, September 15, the *Canadians* were to be going to the attack.

(Excerpt from *25th Battalion War Diary* entry for September 15, 1916): *5th Brigade* attacked and captured the *Town of Courcelette... the 25th Battalion* moved forward as though on *General Inspection* the young soldiers behaving like veterans, going through very heavy artillery barrage without a quiver...

Of the six-hundred ninety personnel who went over the top on the day of the assault, the *War Diary* recorded thirty-six dead, one-hundred ninety-one wounded and seventy-seven as *missing in action**.



**It seems likely that at least some of the missing later returned to duty as a later Diary entry records two-hundred fifty-eight casualties all told.*

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

On October 1 the Battalion – its operational strength by then apparently reduced to two-hundred all ranks and twelve machine-guns – *received orders to attack and capture “at all costs” enemy trenches known as KENORA and REGINA... “B”, “C” and “D” Companies... were to proceed over KENORA up to REGINA, which they did, but by the time they had got to the wire the casualties had been so heavy that only one officer was left... and about thirty men...*



The attack was a failure and the survivors had been obliged to fall back to *Kenora Trench*. Total casualties during the action had been a further one-hundred twelve.

(Right above: *Ninety-eight years later, the land on which the action was fought, as seen from Regina Trench Cemetery – photograph from 2014*)

On the night of October 1-2 the 25th Battalion had retired from *the Battle* - and from the area of - *the Somme* and had made its way westwards and then northwards, to the region of the mining centre of Lens. It remained in the area and in the trenches of places such as Bully-Grenay, Angres and Bruay for the next four months or so before returning southward to Neuville St-Vaast, just north-west of Arras.

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*)

By coincidence, one of the neighbouring communities of Neuville St-Vaast, where the 25th Battalion was latterly posted, was the village of Vimy, in German hands at the time, dominated by a lengthy ridge – also occupied by the Germans – to the south-west.

From April 2 until April 7, the 25th Battalion had been in intense training on ground that had been re-arranged so as to resemble the terrain that was to be attacked in what was now an obviously imminent offensive. On the 8th the unit had moved forward – although *not* via those well-known tunnels, kilometres of which had been excavated for reasons of both surprise and safety.

(continued)

On April 9 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 to be 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 below: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division, burdened 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*)

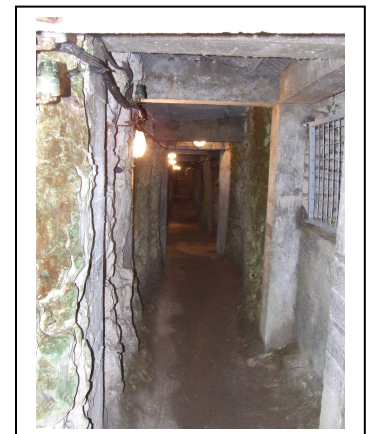
The Canadian 2nd Division was not responsible for the Ridge itself, thus the 25th Battalion on those first two days had been involved in the clearing of the community of Thélus, further down the slope and on the right-hand – the southerly - side of the attack.



(Right below: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)

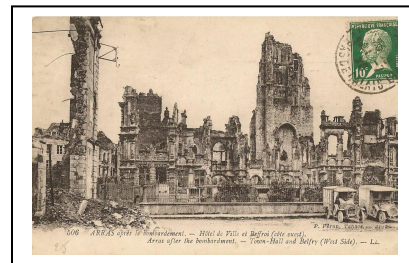
The Germans, having lost the Ridge and the advantages of the high ground, had retreated some three kilometres in front of the Canadians whose further offensives were less successful than that of Easter Monday; while some progress at times was made – at Arleux-en-Gohelle, for example - German counter-attacks often re-claimed ground from the British and Canadian troops – as at Fresnoy in early May. And there was always a price to pay.

The 25th Battalion, as a unit of the Canadian 2nd Division, served in various capacities on these occasions. Otherwise, the Canadians were engaged once more in those everyday routines of trench warfare.



(continued)

Days after the official end of the five-week *Battle of Arras*, the 25th Battalion had been withdrawn on June 1 to a *Corps Rest Area* in the proximity of Crouy-Serviens, a community to the north-east of the city of Arras and also just north of the theatre of the just-terminated battle of that name. There the unit was to re-enforce - witness the arrival of Private Cox - and to re-organize.



(Right above: *The remnants of the City Hall of Arras and its venerable belfry towards the end of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

* * * * *

While his personal file records Private Cox as arriving at Crouy-Serviens on June 16, the War Diary of the 25th Battalion does *not*. However, the entry of the previous day, June 15, makes note of a re-enforcement draft of one-hundred forty-seven *other ranks* reporting to *duty*. Likely Private Cox was among *that* number.

Having then spent the entire month of June in a... *Rest Area*, on July 1 the 25th Battalion was ordered to move forward once more and by the 3rd it had relieved two battalions of the British Leicestershire Regiment in the forward area.

The British High Command had by this time decided to undertake a summer offensive in the *Ypres Salient*, Belgium. Thus, in order to divert German attention – and also his reserves - from this area, it had ordered operations to take place at the sector of the front running north-south from Béthune to Lens.



The Canadians were to be a major contributor to this effort.

(Right above: *An example of the conditions under which the troops were ordered to fight in the area of Lens during the summer of 1917 – from Miroir*)

One of the primary objectives was to be *Hill 70* in the northern outskirts of the mining centre of Lens.

(Right: *Canadian troops advancing across No-Man's Land in the summer of 1917 – from Le Miroir*)



Those expecting *Hill 70* to be a precipitous and ominous elevation are to be surprised. It is hardly prominent in a countryside that is already flat, the highest points being the summits of slag heaps which date from the mining era of yesteryear. Yet it was apparently high enough to be considered - by the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie – to be the key feature in the area, its capture more important than the city of Lens itself.

(Right: *This gentle slope rising to the left is, in fact, Hill 70. A monument to the 15th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry stands nearby in tribute. – photograph from 1914*)



Objectives were limited and had for the most part been achieved by the end of August 15. Due to the dominance of *Hill 70* over the entire area, it was expected that the Germans would endeavour to retrieve it and so it proved; on August 16 several strong counter-attacks were launched against the Canadian positions, positions that by this time had been transformed into defensive strong-points.

These defences held and the Canadian artillery, which was employing newly-developed procedures, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. *Hill 70* remained in Canadian hands.



(Right above: *A Canadian 220 mm siege gun, here under camouflage nets in the Lens Sector, being prepared for action – from *Le Miroir)**

Of course, the Germans were not the only ones to incur casualties: by the time that the 25th Battalion retired on August 17, the unit had recorded some one-hundred fifty *killed, wounded and missing in action*.

The son of Abraham Cox, fisherman, and Sarah Cox (*née Skinner*) he was brother to at least Mary J., to whom he had allotted a monthly twenty-dollar allowance from his pay. Private Cox was reported as having been *killed in action* on that August 15, during the fighting at or near *Hill 70*.



(Right: *Mr. Doug Wells of Harbour Breton has been kind enough to point out that, unfortunately, the sacrifice of Private Joseph Cox has not been honoured on the War Memorial in that community. – photograph from 2015*)

Joseph Cox had enlisted at the *apparent* age of twenty-one years: date of birth in Harbour Breton (also *Briton*), Newfoundland, April 25, 1895.

Private Joseph Cox 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 26, 2023.

