

From Here to There ... and Home Again



The First World War Experiences of
Charles Melburne Johnston
No. 4 Canadian Siege Battery



This map¹ shows some of the major locations and battles that involved the Canadian Expeditionary Force in World War I. It shows Boulogne, where Charles' Battery first landed in France; Amiens, near which was their first firing position; Vimy Ridge; and, key battles in Belgium.

This story is based in large part on the personal diary kept by Charles throughout his years overseas (most soldiers kept diaries) and his Battery's official War Diary. In addition, a number of other public sources were examined for background information and other details related to World War 1, the role of a Siege Battery, and Charles' life and experiences.

¹ www.sikhmuseum.com/buckam/flanders.html (In an article about Private Buckham Singh, a Canadian Sikh infantryman in WW1).

Chapter 1: From Here ...

On September 9, 1916, twenty-three year old Charles Melburne Johnston was at his gun placement in Englebelmer, France, just north-east of the town of Albert. The Battery had been at this location since August 10th and was supporting Canadian attacks on the German-held towns of Thiepval and Courcellette as part of the Battle of the Somme. The Battery's role that day was to bombard German trenches. At about 16h25 they fired a series of 40 rounds from their four 8-inch Howitzers at one German trench location and then at 17h20 fired another 50 rounds at another.

Back in Saint John, New Brunswick, his wife Mary, née Fitzmaurice, gave birth to their first child, a son also named Charles². The new father would not hear about his new son until about a week later by telegram and would not see him until after being discharged at the Saint John Dispersal Station six months after the end of the war on May 10, 1919. A hardship certainly, but not comparable to that endured by the families of more than 200,000 Canadian soldiers who were killed or wounded in the war.



Charles Johnston senior was born on June 2, 1893 and raised in and around Saint John. He was the second of nine children of Herbert Crealock Johnston and Margaret Florence Johnston, née Gamblin. The photograph to the left is of Herbert and Margaret with seven of their nine children (two more to come!) in 1903³. Charles is at the far right of the picture and was ten years old at the time. As a young man he became a “commercial traveler”, which

today would be referred to as a travelling sales representative. After the war, in 1923, the Saint John Directory lists him as a Sales Manager for the Canadian Drug Company Ltd. This company was acquired by the National Drug & Chemical Company of Canada and then (ultimately) in 1991 by McKesson Corporation of San Francisco. It now operates as McKesson Canada. The photograph to the right is of Main Street, Saint John, c. 1910.



² His son was also named Charles Melbourne Johnston; but, with an “ou” instead of just the “u”. It has not been possible to determine the reason for the change of spelling.

³ From the “Gamblin Family Website”, www.gamblinfamily.org/margaret_florence_gamblin.html Charles' brother Cecil, who enlisted in the same unit as Charles, is standing behind his father's left shoulder.

In 1912, at age nineteen, Charles joined the 3rd Canadian Garrison Artillery, a reserve artillery unit stationed on Partridge Island just offshore of Saint John. By 1914, the total authorized size of the Canadian armed forces was about 3,000 (all ranks) and “684 horses”. The Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery was made up of five companies and their main peacetime functions were to garrison the fortresses on either coast of Canada and to assist in the training of militia⁴. Along with many of his colleagues in the reserves, Charles enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force on October 18, 1915 at age 22. His attestation papers indicate that he was “5 ft 6 inches tall”, had a fair complexion, grey eyes and light brown hair.

Charles’ younger brother, Cecil Rhodes Johnston had also served in the Canadian Garrison Artillery and he enlisted on November 6th in the same unit as Charles. He was aged nineteen at the time. He survived the war as well and was listed in the 1923 Saint John Directory as a messenger for the Standard Bank.

Charles married Mary Fitzmaurice on November 3, 1915 knowing that he was likely to be sent overseas in the very near future.



Charles and Mary lived at 133 Mecklenburg Street in Saint John; they may have been living with his parents at that time. While Charles was away at the war, it seems that Mary went to live with her mother, Annie (Lambert) Fitzmaurice at 78 Broad Street (based on a report by Jean McCarthy, Mary’s neice). The house was owned by Willie Lambert, Annie’s

brother, who lived next door at 76 Broad Street. He is described in the 1923 Saint John Directory as a painter. After the war, Charles and Mary resided in a house at 96 Queen Street. All of these homes are within three or four blocks of each other in what is referred to as “uptown” Saint John; an area that is residential to this day. The photograph is of King Square in the early 1900s; the park is very close to where Charles and Mary lived.

⁴ G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D. *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919, Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, Queen’s Printer, Ottawa, 1962.

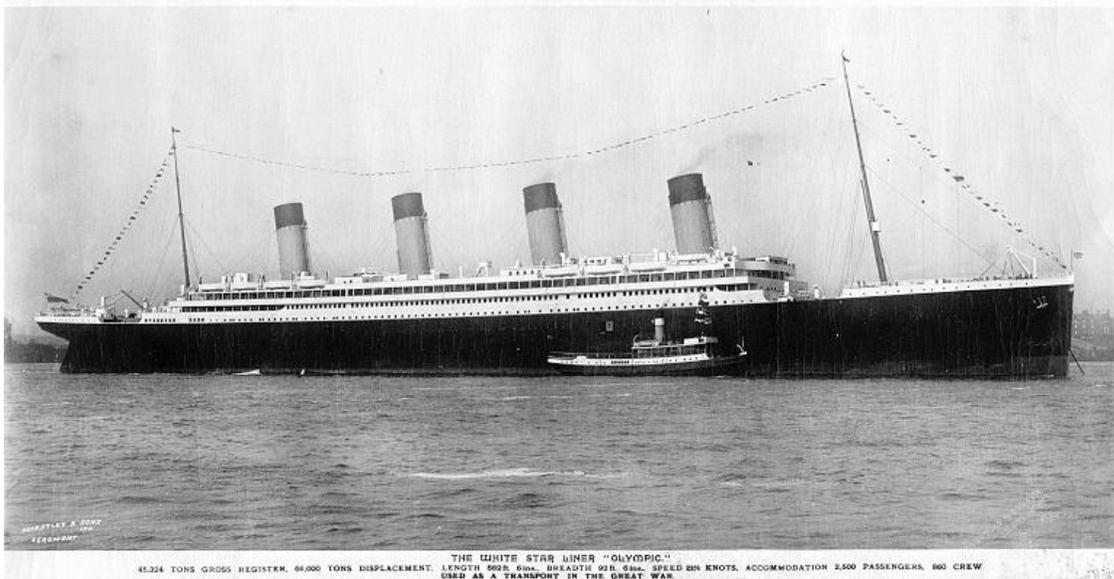
Chapter 2: To There ...

Having enlisted with a number of the men from his artillery unit back in October 1915, it was not until March 30, 1916 that they were called to the war. Although not clear from official records, it is likely that the unit spent the intervening four months in training. Their unit was now designated as the 4th Siege Battery of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was composed of 6 officers and 187 “other ranks” all from Saint John and other parts of New Brunswick.

At the beginning of his personal war diary, Charles notes:

“We left St. John [by train] March 30/16 about 6 pm after being given a magnificent send-off from the people of St. John. We landed in Halifax about 6 or 7 March 31st after having received good wishes at such places as Sussex, Moncton, Truro, etc. We were put aboard the Olympic on the 31st but did not sail until 9:30 am April 5th.”⁵

The RMS *Olympic* was one of three “Olympic Class” ocean liners built by the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast Ireland for the White Star Line. The other two members of this class were the RMS *Titanic* and the RMS *Britannic*. The *Titanic* was most famously lost when it hit an iceberg on April 15, 1912. The *Britannic* was requisitioned as a hospital ship in November 1915 and hit a mine and sank on November 21, 1916. Thirty people died and 1,036 were saved. The *Olympic* survived the war and was eventually retired from service in 1935⁶.



⁵ C.M. Johnston, War Diary (hand written), 1916 through 1918. (Throughout this story, quotes from Charles’ Diary will be noted in italics).

⁶ www.julesverne.ca/olympic.html, see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olympic_class_ocean_liner

On its trip to England, the Olympic carried about 7,000 Canadian soldiers. After the six-day crossing, they arrived in Liverpool at about 11h00 on April 11th, but *“pulled out again at 18h00 for Portsmouth, arriving there at 05h00 the following morning”*. Charles noted that *“Quite a few people were out to meet us even at that early hour, our Battery being the first Canadians stationed there.”*

One of the people who was rescued following the sinking of the *Britannic* in 1916, was a Nurse, Violet Jessop, who had already survived an accident on the *Olympic* when it collided with the HMS *Hawke* in 1911. She had also survived the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912!

At their first “muster” in England, the Battery now consisted of 6 Officers and 202 “other ranks”. Their Commanding Officer was Major Louis W. Barker, who remained in that position for almost all of the time the Battery was engaged in the war. They were stationed at Clarence Barracks in Portsmouth for three weeks and Charles noted, *“I must say the people there used us great. It was our first initiation into the Imperial way of issuing food to its soldiers. A great difference to the [Canadian way].”* At the first muster, Captain H.J. Davison reported that they were punctual (“Parade awaiting my arrival”), that the appearance of the men was “good” and that the knowledge of their numbers was “perfect”.

The Battery was then entrained for Horsham, West Sussex, in the south of England. This base was known as one of the best artillery camps in England for basic training. After that they moved to Lydd, Kent in the south-east. This was an important “finishing school” for artillery units and the 4th Siege Battery finished its firing course at this base. According to Charles’ diary, they “did remarkably well”. While in training, on May 7th, the Battery was

The Battery was escorted by the English Royal Artillery Band to the train for Horsham. The RAB continues to this day as one of eight London-based State Bands that supports all State ceremonial duties including the historic Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle, and all Royal and State Visit Gun Salutes with the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery in Hyde Park and Green Park.



Headquarters Staff, the 131st, 185th, and 167th Batteries, and Reserve Depot, Canadian Brigade Siege Artillery, Horsham, Sussex, June, 1916.

redesignated as the “131st (Canadian) Siege Battery”. The picture to the left, taken at Horsham, is of the Headquarters Staff for three Batteries, including the 131st. The reason for the redesignation is not clear but it may have been a designation of the British Army while the Battery was in England and assigned to the British force in France. Later in the war, on January 11, 1917, the unit was returned to its designation as “No. 4

Canadian Siege Battery, CEF”.



From Lydd, the Battery was moved about 320 kilometers west to Bristol to prepare for their transfer to France. The men were billeted at a recently closed exhibition ground called The White City. From here they shipped all of their stores and equipment to France: including four 8” Howitzers, 24 lorries, four tractors (to pull the guns) and all of the other heavy equipment. The men were then sent back the same 300 kilometers to Folkstone (near Dover) for embarkation to France.

“In the spring of 1914 Bristol was looking forward in anticipation to a balmy summer, one that would bring with it a major attraction, the Bristol International Exhibition, popularly known as “The White City”. The Exhibition occupied 32 acres and included massive temporary structures and pavilions made mostly from white plasterboard. By the time the exhibition opened, £100,000 had been spent on its construction. Attractions included replicas of Bristol castle, Drake's ship Revenge and a group of buildings depicting "Shakespeare's England", along with a figure eight roller-coaster, the Eastern Tea Gardens, Bostock's arena and jungle, the Bowl Slide, the "Crazy Kitchen", and a "House of Nonsense". The exhibition was opened by the Lord Mayor on May 28, 1914, to coincide with the Spring Bank Holiday. However the opening ceremony was briefly interrupted by a suffragette who wanted to draw attention to the force-feeding of women imprisoned for their role in the suffrage campaign. The exhibition was due to run until October 14, but even before Britain declared war on Germany (August 4, 1914) the site had struggled to attract sufficient visitors to pay its way. In fact, wind-up proceedings in the courts



had started as early as the middle of June. Keen to keep the site open as long as possible the receiver appointed new management, attracted additional funding - including national and local charities - and made improvements to the grounds and buildings. Although the intention was for the exhibition to continue for a little while longer, the declaration of war put a stop to any visitors. Passenger trains were immediately requisitioned by the War Office and the site closed on August 15. After that, the site was used to billet British and other soldiers on their way to

France. In fact, "Bristol's Own" moved into the new barracks during October, 1914 and there are wonderful and somewhat surreal photos, of the raw recruits training in and around the former exhibition structures. The battalion stayed at the "White City" site until it left Bristol in June, 1915.”⁷

⁷ www.thisisbristol.co.uk (August 29, 2013).

The 8" Howitzer is a large gun designed to do the heavy damage of the "barrage" tactic. It fires shells that weigh about 90 kilograms (200 pounds) and have a diameter of some 200 millimeters (8 inches). These artillery pieces have a firing range of about 10,000 meters (10 kilometers or just over 6 miles). The picture to the right is of an 8" Howitzer being towed behind its tractor in the Somme region. The large guns of the Siege Batteries were



used for four major purposes. First, they could be used as anti-battery weapons to attack and destroy the large guns of the enemy. Second, they were used to attack the enemy trenches to kill infantrymen and disrupt the movement of enemy troops. Third, they were used for the "barrage" tactic in advance of a ground attack by allied soldiers. Finally, they were used for general harassment of enemy troops to attempt to affect morale.

Chapter 3: To France and into Action

Charles' Battery left England for France on July 29, 1916. On the day before, he had been appointed provisionally to the rank of "Bombardier"; that appointment was confirmed by "Part II of the Daily Orders #296" on July 31st. They arrived at Boulongesur-Mer, on the north-west coast on July 31st. As much as Charles had been impressed by British towns and their hospitality, he was unimpressed by Boulogne. His diary notes: *"This is not much like our Canadian cities being very dirty and unsanitary."* The Battery was moved to St. Martins Camp in Boulogne for the night. The plan was for the unit to leave by train the next day with all their equipment "for the line".

Early morning of August 1st, an advance party of one officer and 14 men left by road to learn about the Battery's first placement at Beaussart near Mailly-Maillet. Charles stayed behind with the rest of the unit; they had medical inspections and anti-gas helmet drill in the morning. At noon, the "right section" (about half of the Battery) proceeded to the Boulogne docks to meet the steamer carrying all the equipment. The next morning, August 2nd, all personnel were at the docks to load the equipment onto the train for Amiens (see map on page 2 to locate Boulogne and Amiens). The train trip was about 120 kilometers from Boulogne to a small town just outside Amiens, called Longueau. All personnel, equipment, guns and tractors arrived there on August 3rd.

The Battery left Longueau at about 14h00 that day and arrived in Raincheval at about 18h00; Raincheval is about 35 kilometers north of Longueau. The guns and other supplies arrived later, about 23h00. The men were billeted in barns and houses in and around the town. The next morning was spent repairing the gun limbers (2 wheel carts designed to tow the guns), which were broken at the draw bars. The Battery diary notes that "these bars are seemingly too light for the strain which they are supposed to stand".

At 20h00 on August 4th, the men left by lorries and wagons for their first gun position at Mailly-Maillet, about 15 km east of Raincheval, taking with them their stores and ammunition. They unloaded overnight in "an orchard on the east side of Mailly". The next morning, the Battery began preparing the gun placements at 06h00 by laying a foundation of broken stone and then constructing the gun "bocks"⁸. The guns arrived at 23h30 and were in place by 03h00.

August 6th was spent erecting the overhead cover for the guns, undertaking general repairs, sorting the ammunition and constructing new dugouts and a control station. They were here to support the Battle of the Somme, one of the major battles of 1916.

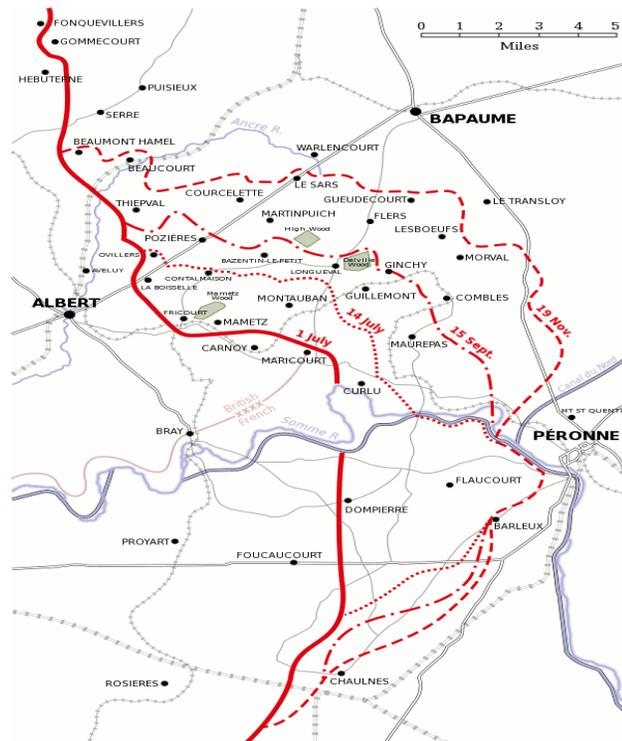
⁸ My research suggests that the "bock" was a triangular wooden platform that went under the two wheels and the trail end of the gun to provide stability while firing, especially in softer ground.

Chapter 4: Supporting the Battle of the Somme

The “Somme” is one of the 96 “Departments” in France and takes its name from the Somme River, which runs through it. The Battle of the Somme lasted from July 1, 1916 through November 18, 1916. Over its course more than 100,000 allied men were killed or wounded. One part of the battle, the Battle for Flers Courcelette, from September 15-22, 1916, marked the debut of the Canadian Corps on the Somme.

At 07h00 on August 7th, they prepared their guns for action by selecting auxiliary marks, sight lines, the Observation Posts (in the allied trenches near Auchonvillers, about 2 km further east of Mailly) and established “telephonic communications”. At about 15h00, they “registered their zero lines” (tested the accuracy of their guns) by firing 20 rounds at a junction of two enemy trenches near Beaumont-Hamel; the range was about 7,000 meters (7,200 yards). Beaumont-Hamel is where, a few weeks earlier on July 1st, almost the entire Newfoundland regiment had been wiped out; of 802 men, 710 were killed, wounded or missing.⁹ After these test firings, they discovered that the ground under their gun placements was soft and they had to reconstruct the placements and the bocks. Those repairs took most of the next day-and-a-half leading to a series of firings on August 9th on German trenches.

At this point the Battery diary notes that 1 Officer and 80 men left to prepare a new gun position; no particular reason is given. However, Charles’ diary notes: *“We only stayed here [at Mailly] about 4 days. Heinie made it too warm for us, so we pulled back to Englebelmer”*. The placements were about 1,000 meters west of Englebelmer. They also moved their Observation Post to a location in an old French trench between Mesnil and Hamel. This location did not seem much better; Charles reported that it was *“in this position we received our baptism by shell fire”* while taking part in the allied attack on Thiepval and Courcelette.



⁹ Newfoundland and the Great War, www.heritage.nf.ca/greatwar

About the 15th of July, the Battery began to make their positions more permanent by constructing new “quarters” (dugouts) and improving the gun placements and the communication lines. Between then and the end of August, the Battery alternated between shelling trenches and attacking a number of enemy batteries. In total over that two week period they fired about 1,120 rounds of ammunition; this would represent over 100,000 kilograms (220,000 pounds) of shells. The Battery remained at their location near Englebelmer until the end of September, firing at about the same rate throughout that month.

In the first week of October 1916 the Battery transferred themselves and their guns to Courcelles-au-Bois, about 7 km north of Englebelmer. From this location they continued to bombard German trenches and artillery in and around Beaumont-Hamel. In what appears to be an error, Charles’ diary indicates that “*we were at this place from Nov. 16th [sic.] until December 11th*”. The Battery diary indicates that they were fully operational by October 10th at the latest. In any case, Charles notes: “*... take it from me we worked and the weather was devilish. We had our guns in a grain field – some mud. The ammo was hard to get up to them, each shell weighing 200 lbs.*”

He also noted tragically: “*It was here we had our first casualties. Mr. Kerr and Gr. Ashwood being killed at O.P.*” (the Observation Post). Mr. Kerr was Lieutenant William G. Kerr, one of the six Officers. He had been born in Saint John and was an accountant in Summerland B.C. when he enlisted in the No. 4 Overseas Siege Battery. He too had been active in the 3rd Regiment of the Canadian Garrison Artillery. He was 27 (almost 28) when he died. Gunner Ashwood was Charles S. Ashwood, a 31 year-old, married, jeweller in Saint John when he enlisted with the Battery. The two are buried in the Bertrancourt Cemetery, the only Canadians among 412 other casualties, In Plot 1, Row F, Graves 20 and 21.

The Battery remained at Courcelles-au-Bois until December 10th when the guns were dismantled and sent by road to Doullens. The men followed by lorry the next day. Doullens is a town that was about 40 kilometers behind the lines. It appears that the unit was being re-assigned further north along the front and were given a day of rest in between.

On December 12th, the personnel were paraded at 07h00, entrained at 09h00, with their guns and caterpillars on the same train, and arrived in Bruay at 15h00 that afternoon (about 45 kilometers north-east of Doullens). The troops were billeted in the town. The guns were sent to a workshop of another unit at Ruitz to be overhauled, accompanied by one N.C.O. and 8 men. Meanwhile, another N.C.O. and 10 men proceeded to Bully-Grenay to examine and begin preparations for their new position there. All personnel followed on the 15th and were allotted billets. For an unexplained reason, it took from

December 16th through December 27th to prepare the gun positions and it was only on December 27th that their ammunition arrived.

In his diary Charles notes that they had a couple of days rest while at Bruay and received *“most of our Xmas mail here”*. The Battery spent its first Christmas in France at their guns in Bully-Grenay; Charles adds *“and we had a very good one”*.

They began shelling enemy trenches and batteries again on the afternoon of January 3, 1917 and continued for the rest of the month. By Order dated January 11, 1917, the unit was assigned to the Canadian force and redesignated as the No. 4 Canadian Siege Battery. On January 27th, all personnel and guns were moved out of position and proceeded back to Bruay for a half-day's rest before their next assignment. As Charles put it:

“Very cold weather came on us here and in the midst of it our unit and several others were detailed for the Gypsy Circuit through Belgium. We made the trip by lorry and the cold and weariness was something terrible.”

Chapter 5: “Gypsy Circuit through Belgium”

The battery left Bruay at about 9:00pm on the 27th and arrived in Morbecque, France about 30 kilometers north at 9:00 am the next morning. On the 30th they left Morbecque for their new position at Vlamertinge, Belgium, a small village just to the west of Ypres.

Charles noted that *“We were shelled here but had no casualties. Did very little firing ourselves.”* The Battery diary notes that they were in position at this location for the first half of February. During that period two of the guns had to be taken out of operation and sent to workshops set up behind the lines for repairs, likely damaged in the shelling.

On February 13th they moved about 20 kilometers south to a position referred to as “Petit Pont” which is near Ploegsteert, Belgium. They were shelled again and this time the shelling included mustard gas. Again they were fortunate to sustain no casualties. They stayed here until February 23rd at which time the Battery moved back to Morbecque, France where it was split into two groups. The “Right Section” made its way south, behind the lines, via St. Hilaire, Bruay and Ecoivres to their ultimate destination at Mont St. Eloi. There they began to prepare positions that would support the Canadian attack of Vimy Ridge in just over a month.

Charles stayed with the “Left Section” and it appears that he (they) were not too pleased. When he noted the split into two sections he noted that the left was *“going on with the circuit, of course I was with the left.”* The Left Section moved from Morbecque to Le Touret (about 20 kilometers south-west of Armentières) on the 25th and set up there to spend a few days firing at enemy placements.

The month of March, 1917 was spent moving among three or four positions, all of them within about 20 kilometers between Armentières and Bethune. At times there appeared to be some confusion as to where the battery was supposed to be, but this could have been part of the planning (distraction) for the upcoming assault on Vimy Ridge. One location was called Pont du Hem near “Water Farm”. Charles noted *“It surely was water, all right. Slept in an old barn. Simply great for the health that time of year”*. They then moved further south to Gore. *“This place had never been shelled by Fritz until we came. We certainly messed it up then. It was the first time we were concentrated on. It was lovely.”* Through an apparent mistake they were ordered back to Pont du Hem but only stayed a day before being sent back to Gore!

For his role at this location, Lieutenant J.A. Bruce, who was commanding the Left Section, was awarded the Military Cross for *“gallantry and coolness displayed. While one of the guns of section was being heavily shelled by the enemy he continued firing with the other gun. He also maintained communications with headquarters while under fire ...”*

On March 23rd, they were moved to La Couture (Charles spells it “Locature” in his diary). He reports: *“We surely received our medicine here. This is the place we were blown up. So we rejoined our right section at Mont St. Eloi.”* The Battery diary for March 28th notes: “Both Guns under Hostile shell fire. At 1:30 pm fire broke out in cartridge shed and soon after some of our own shells exploded. At dusk guns were taken out of position and parked at Fosse. (The term “Fosse” used in the diary does not appear to be a town or village; the word can be translated as “pit” in English.) Both Howitzers were found to be in damaged condition and were removed to a workshop. At 13h00 on March 31st, 1917 the personnel of the Left Section joined the Right Section in Battery position at Mont St. Eloi.

On the same day, Charles became ill with tonsillitis and was sent to the 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance Group, which maintained a treatment facility behind the lines. The photograph shows the building in a village about two kilometers west of Mont St. Eloi that served as the field hospital. It is now operated as a bed-and-breakfast and proudly displays both the British and Canadian flags at its entrance.



Charles was one of 388 Canadian soldiers admitted to this facility in the month of March. He was returned to his unit on April 6, 2017 in time to participate in the battle for Vimy Ridge.

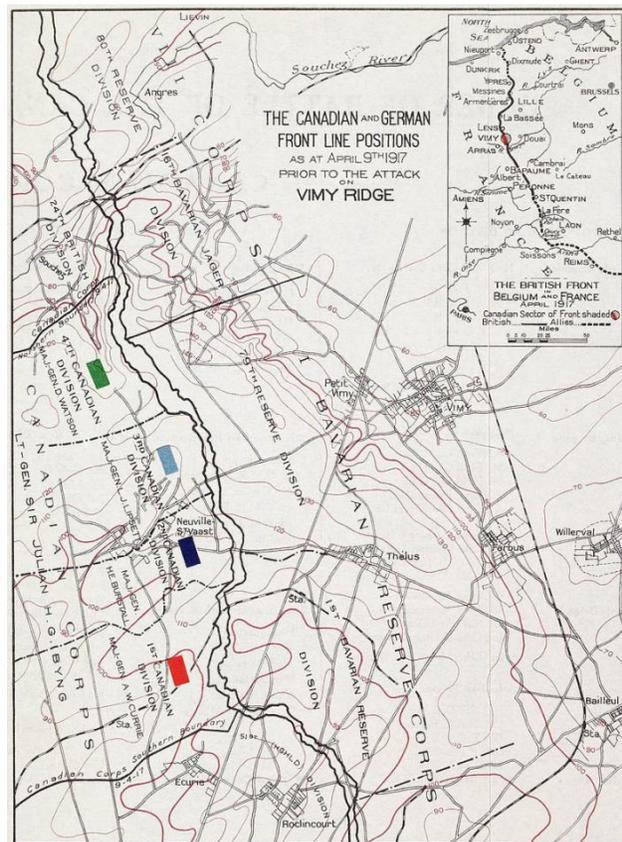
Chapter 6: Vimy Ridge and Beyond

Charles' record of the Battle for Vimy Ridge is very short: *“So we rejoined our right section at Mont St. Eloi where we took part in the bombardment that resulted in the capture of Vimy Ridge.”* Of course, in Canadian history, this battle is seen as not only an important victory in the War itself but also as an important milestone in the development of Canada as a nation.

On April 1, 1917, the Battery began a week of heavy bombardment of enemy trenches, dugouts and other key locations. This heavy pounding was planned to disrupt enemy movements by destroying trenches and to affect morale by continued harassment.

Then on April 9, 1917, the day planned for the attack, the battery fired 293 rounds of barrage fire from 05h30 to 15h20 that afternoon. This appears to be the first time that the Battery was engaged in the “barrage” tactic. It involves the infantry proceeding behind a creeping barrage laid down by lighter field guns at 100-yard increments supported by the medium and heavy Howitzers which establish a series of standing barrages further ahead against enemy defensive positions.

The picture to the right shows the positions of the Canadian and German lines before the attack. The front is marked by the two black, curved lines (trenches) running from top to bottom of the map. The positions of the four Canadian infantry Divisions are marked by the coloured rectangles to the left.



Overall, for that day, the No. 4 Canadian Siege Battery fired some 394 rounds, or almost 36,000 kilograms of shells! In the first 12 hours of the attack, this represented a rate of firing of about 29 shells per hour or one every 2 minutes. For the period from April 1st through April 23rd, while the battery was positioned at Mont St. Eloi, they fired 4,128 rounds or over 371,000 kilograms of shells.

From April 24th through 26th, the Battery moved in stages all its guns (4 of them), all stores and all personnel about 5 kilometers north-east to a position on the Carency Road near Souchez. Charles noted in his diary: *“Just in rear of Souchez here we had our first taste of good spring weather. It was simply grand.”* By the end of April, the Battery consisted of 4 Officers (down from 5 as Lieutenant Bruce had been wounded on April 10th) and 168 Other Ranks (20 reinforcements had arrived late in the month).

The first two weeks of May involved heavy action including the bombardment of trenches, houses, train stations and junctions, and machine gun placements; this was part of the continuing slow advance after the success at Vimy Ridge. On May 16th the Battery split again into two sections: the Right Section went to a more forward position at Cité Gaumont and, later, on May 21st, the Left Section moved slightly further north along the road to Bethune. The right section lost another gun at their new position and “pulled back about 300 yards”. The Left Section concentrated for the rest of the month on shelling hostile batteries. During this period the Battery had 4 killed and 3 wounded by enemy shell fire (names were not recorded in the unit’s diary). While not clear from the records, it appears that the men were lost when the gun was attacked and destroyed.

From May 8th through May 12th, Charles returned to 3rd Canadian Field Ambulance facility, this time suffering from trench fever, a bacterial disease carried by the lice the men faced constantly.

The Battery reunited near Souchez at the end of May and remained at or near this location for the next five months through to the beginning of November. Charles noted that the *“Left and Right Sections spent a good summer here”*. June was characterized by a series of attacks on enemy batteries. An Officer, Lieutenant Fairweather, and Gunner O’Connor were awarded the Military Cross and the Médaille Militaire, respectively for action on April 10th to 12th at Mont St. Eloi when they laid and maintained communications lines between the forward Observation Post and the Battery while under hostile shelling. July involved much of the same anti-battery fire. Lieutenant Bruce was wounded again along with one other man. On July 11, 1917, Charles was promoted to acting Corporal and, although he relinquished the appointment on September 6th, he was re-appointed to that rank on October 18th.

It appears that during August, some adjustments were being made to the Canadian forces. A number of men were transferred to other Batteries, including Captain Ring and six other ranks who were assigned to the No. 8 Canadian Siege Battery (Captain Ring on a temporary basis). In addition, during this period, the 4th Siege Battery shared Observation Post (the Lawson Post on Hill 65) duties with the 2nd Siege Battery. The unit diary notes that “Men [are] still going on leave to Paris at a rate of five per week. Health of the unit rather above normal.”

In September, a new, more conversational, person took over the record keeping for the unit's war diary. For example, for September 2nd he noted:

“There was very little activity on either side today. Low clouds and showers prevented aerial activity. Fairly cool, temp averaged 58°, west wind of about 30 feet per second [20 mph]. Three enemy planes appeared over our position evidently not observing for their artillery as there was no hostile shelling. We fired only twenty-seven rounds...”

The month continued the firing on hostile batteries using ground, balloon and aerial observations, while being fired upon by the enemy. On September 6th, the enemy opened a fifty minute concentrated bombing with both gas and high explosives. The men were forced to wear respirators for forty minutes. The month of October continued much the same. By the end of October, the unit was reinforced up to 8 Officers and 165 Other Ranks, for a total complement of 173.

Beginning on November 7, 1917, the Battery moved their stores by light railway to the Lens Siding. One gun crew proceeded to Maroc (near Grenay) to prepare new gun positions. They took over three guns from the British 258th Siege Battery and brought up one of their own. On the 8th personnel were billeted in Grenay. At this point Charles notes that *“all Canadians were supposed to go to Paschendaele but we were lucky and didn't. Our new section came out from England and they did.”* The Battery remained here firing on hostile batteries for the rest of the month and into December. On November 29th, the unit diary notes that

“The enemy carried out a destructive shoot on our position in Maroc with 4.1, 5.9 and 8 inch [guns], approximately 250 rounds. The trailer was blown off howitzer #733 and quantity of ammunition destroyed, suffering only one casualty in personnel (slight head wound).”

By now the unit was up to 200 men; 9 officers and 191 men. On December 16th the Battery moved about 12 kilometers south to Thélus. Charles reports that they were now a six-gun Battery and this is where they spent their second Christmas in France. By the end of December, the unit had grown to 223 men to support the six guns.

In mid-December, the new, larger, Battery was split into three sections with the Right Section going to Liévin, the Centre Section to Souchez, and the Left Section remaining at Thélus. All of these locations are within a five kilometer circle between Arras and Lens, centred on the town of Vimy.

On January 13, 1918, all the guns and equipment of the 4th were taken over by the 8th Siege Battery and the 4th, 2nd, 5th and 6th Canadian Siege Batteries, along with the Headquarters Staff of the 2nd Canadian Heavy Artillery Brigade were assigned to a

period of rest and training. The training consisted of musketry, machine gun drill, gun drill, foot drill, physical drill and route marches. A sergeant from the Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry was brought in to be the musketry instructor and a corporal from the Canadian Light Horse Regiment was the machine gun instructor. The rest and training lasted until the end of the month.

The Battery war diary notes that bad weather for the first half of the period meant that most of the training was in the form of lectures but from the 23rd on, the weather was fine and outdoor training proceeded. The commanders of the allied forces may have already been planning for the ultimate victory drive, as the unit diary also notes prophetically: "Considerable attention was also given to the skill of loading and unloading Howitzers on Light Railway."

At the end of the training the war diary notes "The Brigade was inspected on Jan 31st at 2:30 p.m. by the G.O.C. Cdn. Corps [General Officer Commanding, General Arthur Currie] who expressed himself as highly pleased with the progress made with the training."

On February 3rd the Battery returned to the line and took over the positions in Liévin, Souchez, and Thélus that they had handed over to the 8th Siege Battery while the 4th had been on training. They were to remain here until mid-July, 1918. During this five month period, it appears that significant developments were underway at the command level. The 4th Siege Battery remained attached to the Canadian 2nd Brigade (it had been part of the 2nd Brigade throughout the war) until May 29th when it was assigned to the British 67th Brigade. On June 15th it was assigned to the Canadian 1st Brigade and then back to the 2nd Brigade on July 20th.



During March 1918, Charles became ill with a series of bouts of diarrhea to the point where he was evacuated to the 7th Canadian General Hospital in Étaples, France (on the coast just south of Boulogne-sur-Mer where he first arrived. He was at the hospital from March 6th through the 18th. The photograph is of a ward at the hospital in 1917.

Chapter 7: “Our great drive started ...”

On July 20, 1918, the Right Section (3 guns) of the Battery was moved to Roclincourt and the Left Section (3 guns) to Ēcurie, two towns only one kilometer apart, just south of Thélus. Charles notes in his diary:

“While we were in these positions our great drive started and we moved so fast that it is only necessary for me to put down the names of the places.”

The planning for this “great drive” appears to be the reason for January training in loading and unloading the guns on the light railway. It is interesting to note that in his record of the 12 or so subsequent locations, Charles provides dates for each but includes “1917” rather than “1918”.

On August 26th, the Left Section moved forward to replace the Right Section at Ēcurie while that section moved further forward on the 29th to a village called Biache-Saint-Vaast, about 10 kilometers east towards Cambrai (where the push was headed). The blue line on the map shows the route taken in the final push of the war from July 20th to the end of the war.



On September 9th the Battery exchanged positions with the British 249th Siege Battery at Cagnicourt, a position another 10 kilometers further south-east. On the 12th they moved again to a position nearby on Hendecourt Road, just west of Cagnicourt. The 23rd had the unit on the move again to Inchy-en-Artois, about 5 kilometers closer to Cambrai. On the 27th they moved to a location in Bournon Wood, just outside Cambrai. From this position they fired on enemy positions to the north-east in the Sancourt-Blécourt valley.

On October 1st the unit moved to Haynecourt, about 5 kilometers to the north-east (towards Sancourt). On the 10th they moved to Blécourt and Charles notes (written in afterwards) that this was the “*last position we fired in*”. On the 23rd, the guns were moved about 10 kilometers north, crossing the Sensée Canal, to Monchecourt. During this month, on October 17th, Charles was promoted to Sergeant.



The photograph shows Canadian troops on the Arras-Cambrai Road. The Wikipedia account of the battle for Cambrai states the following: “On 8 October, the 2nd Canadian Division entered Cambrai and encountered sporadic and light resistance. However, they rapidly pressed northward, leaving the "mopping up" of the town to the 3rd Canadian Division following close behind. When the 3rd entered the town on 10 October, they found it deserted.

Fewer than 20 casualties had been taken. Frederick Banting, the discoverer of insulin, was wounded in this battle as he was performing his duties as a medic.”¹⁰

The first week of November was mostly rainy and the men of the Battery spent their days in rifle drill, other training and cleaning. On November 7th and 8th they moved their guns to Louches, about 10 kilometers further east along the road to Belgium. They were in this location on November 11, 1918. The unit diary notes: “Weather fine, one-hour rifle drill, word received of armistice with Germany being signed.” Charles’ note is even more cryptic: “*Armistice Nov. 11/17 [sic.]*”.

On November 18th all six guns and part of the personnel moved to Quievrain, just across the border in Belgium, another 30 kilometers to the north-east. Here the guns were sent to a “gun park” to be guarded and cleaned for the rest of the month while the men were billeted in the town. Charles was given 14 days leave to England and returned to his unit on December 6th.

On December 21st, the Battery was moved to St. Symphorien, Belgium near Mons, which had been captured on November 11th. They remained here for the next three months while plans were made and implemented to send the troops back to Canada.

¹⁰ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cambrai_\(1918\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cambrai_(1918)) from Christie, Norm (1997). *For King and Empire: The Canadian at Cambrai, September-October 1918*. Nepean, Ontario: CEF Books.

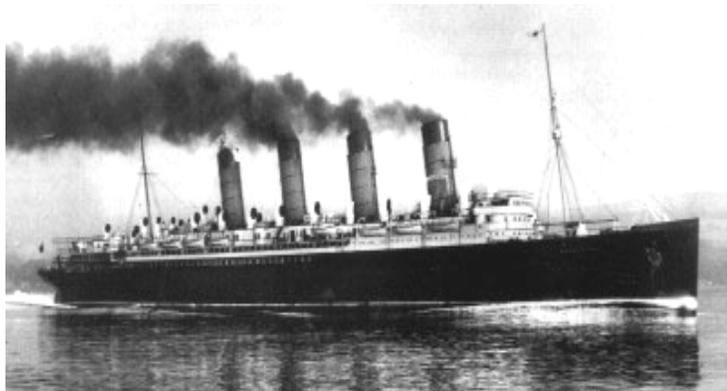
Chapter 8: And home again

On March 25th, "Orders received to leave for England on 29th." It was also noted that the Battery played a game of baseball with the 10th Cdn. Siege Battery. The score was 5 to 3 in favour of the 10th. The Battery left St. Symphorien on the 29th and arrived at CCC Kinmel Park, in northern Wales, on April 2nd. This location was infamous for a riot of Canadian troops earlier in March when their departure for Canada had been delayed and conditions in the camp had deteriorated – the men were on half rations, had no coal for heat and they had not been paid for over a month.

Colonel G.W.L Nicholson described the March riot as follows:

"In all, between November 1918 and June 1919, there were thirteen instances or disturbances involving Canadian troops in England (note: should be Wales). The most serious of these occurred in Kinmel Park on 4th and 5th March 1919, when dissatisfaction over delays in sailing resulted in five men being killed and 23 being wounded. Seventy eight men were arrested, of whom 25 were convicted of mutiny and given sentences varying from 90 days' detention to ten years' penal servitude."

Charles and the 4th Canadian Siege Battery avoided the riots. They were transferred to Southampton later in April and on May 3, 1919, boarded the *HMS Mauretania* (in the photograph to the right) and embarked for Canada. They arrived in Halifax on May 9th. Charles was formally discharged with the rank of Sergeant on May 10, 1919.



The photograph to the left shows both the *Olympic* (left) and *Mauretania* (right) (painted white for its later service as a passenger liner) moored in Southampton in 1935, before her final voyage to the breakers yard in Rosyth, Scotland.



Charles was formally discharged from the armed forces on May 10, 1919 holding the rank of Sergeant at that time. He was given a clean medical certificate, described as 5 ft 6 ½ inches tall, weighing 149 pounds, and in good physical condition, He was awarded a Class A War Service Badge (serial number 265239).

Charles came home to his wife and two-and-a-half year old son and resumed his life as a representative and then sales manager for the Canadian Drug Company Ltd. He and Mary had another child, Elizabeth Marion, on October 5, 1923.



At the beginning of the Great War in 1914, the population of Canada was 7,879,000. At the end of the war in 1918, it was 8,148,000. Out of that population, 619,636 had enrolled to serve and, of those, 424,589 were sent overseas. During the war there were 64,944 military deaths and about 2,000 civilians were killed. In addition, there were 149,732 soldiers wounded. Charles Melburne Johnston served overseas for Canada for three years from April 1916 through May 1919. His war diary does not give much insight into what he witnessed (it is mostly about what they did) or how he felt. During the war the 4th Siege Battery, a unit of some 200 officers and men, suffered 30 casualties, including 10 (one officer and nine other ranks) who were killed in action or died of their wounds.