



## **FINDING THE FALLEN**

BGen G Young (ret) 15th Battalion CEF memorial Project

*"I once was lost but now I'm found"*

Of the 56,638 fatal casualties suffered by the C.E.F. during the Great War, 18,268 remain to this day as Unknowns – meaning their remains were never recovered or recovered but never identified. Those men have no known graves. Those lost in France (11,285) are commemorated on the Vimy Memorial while those lost in Belgium (6,983) are commemorated on the Menin Gate. The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion (48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders) suffered 1,467 fatal casualties all ranks of which 461 have no known resting places: 255 in Belgium and 202 in France.

On 3 June 1916 the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was involved in a night counterattack against Observatory Ridge in the early stages of the battle for Mount Sorrel. The battalion reached the top of the ridge before being forced back down under the slope by ferocious German machine gun and artillery fire. Although they had successfully closed the gap in the Canadian line created by the initial German assault, casualties were very heavy. A number of the dead were buried in the rear near the battalion's start line in a small roadside cemetery called Valley Cottages. This cemetery was damaged by later fighting and following the armistice during the exhumation and collection of remains, those remains that were recovered (both identified and not identified)

were moved and reburied in several CWGC cemeteries such as Railway Dugouts and Oosttaverne Wood Cemeteries.

Extensive research of CWGC Concentration of Graves (Exhumation and Reburials) and Graves registration report Forms from that period by BGen Greg Young and members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group identified that a number of remains of 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion men may have been misidentified by the post war exhumation parties. The remains, recorded as being from the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion Canadian Infantry, had been identified from buttons, kilts and badges found with the remains during exhumation. There was indeed a 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion kilted battalion from BC however research soon established that it had never been in Belgium or France as the unit had been re-roled and re-designated the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pioneer Battalion in Jan 1916 – so the remains could not have been those of 48<sup>th</sup> Bn men. Because the badges and buttons worn by the 15<sup>th</sup> Bn were essentially regimental insignia of the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders, the remains from Valley Cottages had understandably been misinterpreted by the exhumation parties and for almost 100 years 15<sup>th</sup> Bn Fallen had been resting in Oosttaverne Wood Cemetery under headstones inscribed Unknown Soldier of the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion Canadian Infantry.

This evidence, along with the supporting period documents, formed a submission for correction that was presented to the CWGC in Maidenhead, UK. As the CWGC does not make changes to headstones without thorough review and factual evidence that conclusively establishes that an error had been made, we were resigned to the probability that a decision would not be forthcoming quickly. Thus we were pleasantly surprised when the CWGC notified me shortly after receiving the submission, that they had accepted the facts as presented and within one week the headstones in Oosttaverne Wood Cemetery had been re-engraved to read Unknown Soldier of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion Canadian Infantry. Even though only a small handful of 15<sup>th</sup> Bn men were buried at Valley Cottages Cemetery during the battle for Mount Sorrel, we may never be able to put specific names on their headstones. However, finally they now lie together correctly identified as members of the Battalion in which they served when they fell in action.

*“They are not lost, they are here.”*

*Field Marshall Lord Plummer 1927*

**Author’s note:** As a result of this work with the Oosttaverne Wood reburials, we subsequently commenced a thorough examination of CWGC records for all burials in Europe and Belgium where remains had been identified as 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion to establish whether or not such errors occurred in other exhumations and reburials. The CWGC kindly provided a list of all Unknown headstones inscribed as 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion Canadian Infantry so we could begin the systematic research into the exhumation and reburial reports and headstone registers for every one of those headstones. This included having Project members in Belgium and France, Freddy Declerk and Simon Godly, travel to every cemetery where these headstones were located in order to take confirmatory photographs of the specific headstone inscriptions. After two months of research the results were compiled into a submission for correction complete with all supporting documents and photographs which was then sent to the CWGC Maidenhead just

prior to Christmas. Following on the rationale accepted by the CWGC and the precedent set by the earlier Oostaverne Wood corrections, the potential is for a further 20 headstones to be corrected.



**Oostaverne Wood Cemetery after**



**Oostaverne Wood Cemetery before**

**NB: Title photograph shows all four corrected headstones marked with flags at Oostaverne Wood Cemetery**