

In trying to piece together the events leading up to his wounding and subsequent death on the 3rd Sept 1918 I have attempted to write down some of the findings so they will not be lost. At the stage of writing, 22nd Sept 2001, I believe I have now established a reasonable understanding of the essential features of battle of the Drocourt-Queant Defensive German lines and the movement of the Canadian Forces. An extract from "1918 -The unexpected Victory" describes the D-Q line, which was about 10-12Kms south east of Arras. "The D-Q line comprised of a front system and a support system, each with 2 lines of trenches provided with concrete shelters and machine gun posts and very heavily wired. The front line was mainly on the crest or on a forward slope, the support system on the reverse slope. It was without the depth of the Hindenburg position; but the Buissy Switch connecting with the Hindenburg Support, served as a retrenchment. "

Samuel Fowler was part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and was aged 34 when he was sent to France in 1916. Although he originally joined the **152nd** Battalion Saskatchewan Rifles, (also listed as the 'Weyburn East Battalion'), he was transferred to the **5th** Btn CEF on arrival in Europe. The **5th** Battalion was part of the 2nd Infantry Brigade which in turn was part of the 1st Canadian Division, (see endnote). The Canadian soldiers were, until August 1918, mainly a volunteer force of men who had been born or had strong blood ties to the United Kingdom and felt that they had a duty to support the old country.

Samuel's service record and medical record show that he suffered physically a number of times whilst in France; being wounded at least twice previously and suffered from Mumps and Influenza. It is well known that the conditions in the trenches were awful. Not only were the shelling and actions of war terrible but the health and welfare of the troops were disgraceful by today's standards. The experiences of Will Bird¹ of the CEF gives graphic detail on this subject.

Throughout the war the British had managed to resist the German Army taking over Arras and most people know that the Western Front became stalemated along a line from Nieuport in Southern Belgium to Rheims in mid France. In the spring of 1918 the Germans launched a massive offensive called "Operation Michael" which was very successful and pushed the allied forces back to within 40 miles of Paris and routed the British Army back to Amiens. The German Army came close to 'rolling up' the British towards the channel seaports. However, Arras held and the German offensive ran out of steam as they suffered heavy manpower losses and logistical difficulties.

In the August of 1918 the Allies and particularly the British and Canadians planned to reverse the losses. Gradually the British First Army, containing units of Canadian and Australians began to push out of the Amiens and Arras suburbs towards the main German Defensive positions which were many miles deep. Fortunately, the German morale was low due to poor food and miserable economic conditions for their relatives at home. Steady progress was made but attacks were still difficult as the Germans were falling back on prepared positions such as the 'Hindenburg Line'.

Samuel Fowler was part of the British First Army in the Canadian Corps which was based around the South East of Arras. Douglas Haig had told the commander of the First Army on the 15th August to prepare an attack on the German Drocourt -Quéant (D-Q Line) defensive line, which if successful, would outflank the section of the Hindenburg line facing the Third Army. The First Army was north of the Third Army. Both Armies prepared for a combined movement eastward on the 26th August. The Third Army's objectives were, on the right Fliers; in the Centre, Bapaume and Favreuil, and on the left Croisilles. The First Army's immediate objective was the capture of Chapel Hill and Orange Hill and, if achieved exploitation eastwards towards Wancourt, Guémappe and the hilltop village of Monchy le Preux. Only V Corps of the Third Army made any progress. The other Corps met stout resistance, particularly around the strong points of Bapaume and Croisilles. Nevertheless, the Canadian Corps of the First Army achieved a signal success in capturing Chapel and Orange Hills, pressing on took Monchy, Guémappe and Wancourt: an advance at it's greatest of nearly 4 miles. (Note these are all small villages en route across country to the Drocourt -Queant line and are only just discernable on the modern Michelin map.)

The next three days (27th -29th Aug) saw clear signs of a German retirement, particularly in the Third and Fourth Army's sectors and the German's abandoned their southern sector strong points of Croisilles and Bapaume. In

the north the advance of the First Army towards the Drocourt -Quéant line had started well but came to a halt against uncut wire.

On the 29th August the First Army were given the task of attacking the German Drocourt - Quéant defensive line, and the line known as the Vis-en-Artois 'switch'. ('Switch' was the term used for the connecting line to the other German defence line.) They advanced nearly 2 miles on the 30th August but then made no further progress. At this time the First Army, poised before the Drocourt - Quéant line experienced tangible evidence of the enemy's resolve to hold the line by counter attack, which although initially successful, ultimately failed. (The information taken from "1918 the unexpected victory" by J H Johnson, Arms and Armour Press 1997)

From the book "The Canadians at Arras - Aug to Sept 1918" by Norman Christie 1997² I have deduced that it is most likely that Samuel Fowler was taking part in an offensive against the D-Q line and the Vis-en-Artois Switch across what is now the secondary road D956, the Dury to Hendecourt Road. There is an immaculately kept cemetery at a place called 'Upton Wood' and it contains the graves of about 210 mainly Canadian infantry of the 1st Division¹, which comprised of the 5th Battalion and others. Burials are from the Battalions 1st, 5th, 7th and others all in the period 1st to 3rd Sept 1918. There are 10 British burials here too; mainly gunners who I guess supported the operations. On one 5th Battalion headstone there was one inscription; "*Six brothers accepted the call, 3 were crippled and one died*"

The country is a pretty featureless, slightly undulating wilderness; mainly ploughed wheat or maize fields, now growing some sugar beat on what appears to be a light clayey soil. I visited on 19th September 2001 only 2 weeks later than the same time of year that the battle took place in 1918. The soil was wet and sticky underfoot and one can only imagine how it would have been after military operations of shelling and troop movements. Upton Wood was only captured after a fierce battle, a day or so before. The Canadians would then have looked down on the D956 about 300 metres away and the heavily defended Vis-en-Artois Switch line to its left. From the 1:100,000 French Map it appears that Upton wood is on the 70metre contour line. The field slopes down to the D956 across a shallow valley dropping about 20 metres but rising another 10 m as the road approaches. Across the road Southwards towards Hendecourt was another heavily defended hilltop wood called the 'Crows nest' held by the Germans. From this position, the Germans were able to direct devastating firepower onto the forces attacking the D-Q and Switch lines.

Norm Christie says in his book on Page 34, referring to the 28th August "The plan to capture the Drocourt-Queant line was for the 1st and 4th Canadian Divisions to launch a frontal attack from Dury to Cagnicourt and breach the D-Q line and then to advance to the Canal-du-Nord. To accomplish this goal they would have to improve their jump off positions, and get to at least 600 metres of the D-Q line. The fighting at Upton Wood continued through the 31st and 1st September 1918. The Germans counter-attacked Upton Wood but after a few gains, were driven out. The counter-attacks were hurting the Canadians in that they could not properly prepare for the D-Q assault when their own lives were threatened. From Upton Wood you can see to the South East, across the D956, an odd shaped wood on an oval hill. This is the 'Crow's Nest'. On 31st August, this important position was in the hands of the Germans. It would have to be captured before the D-Q assault could take place. The objective was given to the 15th Battalion (48th Highlanders of Toronto). They were to capture and hold the Crows Nest position prior to the main attack on the D-Q line. At 04:50am the 15th launched their attack and against heavy opposition captured the Crows Nest and pushed East of the wood. The Germans counter-attacked but with the support from the 16th (Western Canadian Scottish) Battalion, they drove the Germans back. It was an impressive feat."

Later in the same book when describing the continuing attack on the Drocourt-Line proper it says " The plan for attack was simple. The 4th Division was to attack the D-Q line from Dury, to 500 metres south of the Arras - Cambrai Road. The 1st Canadian Division was to attack to the south of the 4th Division to the village of Cagnicourt, and pass through the village , through woods east of it and capture the Buissy Switch trench system running in front of the Canal du Nord. In the west was Upton Wood, the Crows Nest and the village of Hendecourt-les-Cagnicourt. It was from this position that the 1st Division attacked on the 2nd September 1918" These descriptions determine the route of the 1st Canadian Division

It must have been during the first of these attacks that Samuel received his wounds. The commanding officer's telegram report from the field states that: *"While taking part in an attack made by his unit (5th Cdn Btn) on enemy lines East of the Hendecourt-les-Cagnicourt road to Dury (East of Arras), on Sept 1st 1918, Private Fowler was severely wounded by an enemy machine gun bullet. His wounds were immediately dressed and he was evacuated to No 42 casualty clearing station. He later succumbed to his wounds on the 3rd September 1918".* What I find confusing here is that the records say that the main attack was on the 1st Sept to the Crows Nest, yet the telegram report says that Sam's wounding happened East of the D956. All I can deduce from this is that the 5th Battalion must have been very far forward from its official position, OR the Dates are wrong, OR the officer's report is wrong. This latter possibility is feasible when one considers the heat of battle and the large number of casualties. However, I am pretty convinced that Private Samuel Fowler 925568 was mortally wounded in the area described.

Although Samuel died on the 3rd September his fellow soldiers went on to capture the Drocourt -Quéant line as described below in an extract from "1918 -The unexpected Victory".

"The task of assaulting the D-Q position on the 2nd Sept was given to the Canadian Corps in co-operation with the XVII Corps of the Third Army. The attack was centered on the D-Q position astride the Arras to Marquion Road, and carried out by the 1st and 4th Canadian and the 4th British Divisions, supported by two companies of tanks. Zero hour was 05:30 and the two Canadian Divisions met only token resistance from the defenders who promptly surrendered in considerable numbers. The two trenches of the front system were soon captured and the advance continued on to the support system, where for time it was held up by machine-gun fire. This was eventually overcome and the Buissy switch was reached. Here resistance stiffened, particularly at the southern end, and fighting continued for the rest of the day; resistance at the northern end of the switch, however, was much lighter; many Germans surrendered, and the advance continued beyond, capturing the village of Dury in the process. The 4th British Division on the left flank of the attack took both D-Q systems without much difficulty, but were unable to pass beyond the support line because of machine gun fire from Etaing. XVII, on the right of the Canadian Corps, captured three quarters of a mile of the Hindenburg line as far as the D-Q line and were close to Quéant. The other three Corps in the Third Army gained most of their objectives, and the Fourth Army completed the capture of Peronne."

Following is an illustrative description of the 102nd Battalion's actions from the 1st September fighting just to the north of the 1st Division mainly along the Arras-Cambrai road. The 5th Battalion's experiences would have been similar.

"At 8.30 p.m. on the evening of Sept. 1st the Battalion fell in and marched off to the First Assembly Point in Vis-en-Artois. It was a bright starlight night, and the roads were packed with traffic of all kinds. Enemy planes were very active, and on the way we were held up by a blazing ammunition lorry which had been fired by a bomb and was shooting off the contents of its dangerous load in every direction. The approach to our Assembly Point was difficult in the extreme, lying on the other side of a rolling expanse which was thickly fenced with our own barbed wire; in the starlight it was difficult to keep to the winding trails which led through the barriers, and the whole surface of the ground was deeply furrowed with disused trenches. By 1.00 o'clock the following morning, however, we reached our destination, an extensive sand-pit which afforded excellent cover from the shells which began to drop around us immediately on our arrival. Here we slept until gas shells falling in our midst at 4.45 a.m. compelled our unwilling arousal and the furtive fingering of the ever-objectionable gas mask. It was a chilly dawn, and we were heartily thankful for the tot of rum which was served out just as the barrage broke out at 5.00 am., the signal for the First Canadian Division to "go over." The barrage was extraordinarily intense, and one hour after its commencement we moved forward, maintaining a distance of 1,000 yards from the 87th Bn. Within half-an-hour we passed into a zone of continuous barrage fire put over by the Hun to catch the supporting units. The terrain in this district is undulating, and the descending slopes were pitilessly swept by a hail of shell and machine gun fire, causing comparatively heavy casualties. It was at this point that Major J. F. Gary, M.C., fell mortally wounded by a shell; another claimed six of the Headquarters batmen and cooks, killing one outright, fatally wounding a second and seriously wounding the remaining four. It was a long tramp under such conditions to Drocourt Trench, which had been the jumping-off place for the 87th, and where we were due to remain until such time as we were to go forward to take our share in the active work ahead, the Companies taking shelter in Dury Road. ..."

At the end of the Battle for Arras, the German morale was broken and the state of the war had changed. As nightfall arrived the men of the 4th Division were still trapped on Mount Dury and many men of the 1st Division were hanging on in the Buissy switch. Both knew their positions were precarious and feared what the morning of

Sept 3rd 1918 would bring. At dawn, patrols were sent out but the Germans could not be found. After all the fighting, and after 11,000 casualties, the battle was over. The D-Q line was captured and the Canadians had won in the showdown against a tenacious enemy.

Here is also a quote from an extract in The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War -Oxford University Press 1998. "In early September, the Canadian Corps took the D-Q line through an extremely heavy barrage of 740 guns, tank support at critical moments, heavy fighting by the infantry armed with Lewis guns and rifle grenades, and the poor morale of some of the defenders. The Canadian Corps went on to take the Canal du Nord on the 27th September with daring rush tactics. "

The Battle of Arras and the breaking of the Drocourt-Queant Line was the second huge Canadian Victory in what became to be known as the "Last Hundred Days" and was the crowning glory of the Canadian Corps. However, the cost of this victory was enormous. Between August 26th and 3rd September 1918 more than 11, 000 were Canadians killed, wounded or missing. In fact the last 3 months were some of the worst in the war. In August, 4563 Canadians died, and in Sept 4548. Next to April 1917, these were the worst 2 months of the war.

Samuel Fowler is buried in the Aubigny Communal Cemetery Extension, Pas de Calais, France, approximately 15 Kms northwest of Arras, just off the N39. Here the 42nd Casualty clearing station buried in it during the whole period. There are nearly 3000 burials for 1914-1918 and a small number of 1939-45 casualties are also commemorated. Burials appear to start in Plot I from 1916 and ending with 27th Sept on plot IV. It is noticeable that many Canadians were buried here from the end of Aug 1918 to the 1st Week in September. All Countries and Regiments and Battalions are placed in random order, one supposes in the order of death at the Casualty Clearing Stations and hospitals. Private Samuel Fowler's grave has no inscription other than name, number, rank, Battalion and date of death. Many other graves have inscriptions at the base using words submitted by the family. (I have read that these had to be paid for by the English relative's family at so much per carved letter but Naturalised Canadians had this inscription paid for by the State.)

Some other points of note about the Cemetery: French graves are marked only by a simple concrete cross with an inlaid metal inscription. There were about 10 German graves now marked with Limestone headstones similar to the British ones. (Previously they were only iron crosses) About 30 Moroccan graves were also at Aubigny. These had headstones with carving of the Eastern Crescent and other Arabic words. Photographs have been taken for the record.

Robert Samuel Fowler. Updated -

ⁱ Components of the Canadian Expeditionary Force Arras 1918

1st Canadian Division was as follows:-

1 st Infantry Brigade	2 nd Infantry Brigade	3 rd Infantry Brigade
1 st Battalion (Western Ontario)	5 th Battalion (Saskatchewan)	13 th Battalion (Black Watch)
2 nd Battalion (Eastern Ontario)	7 th Battalion (British Columbia)	14 th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment)
3 rd Battalion (Toronto regiment)	8 th Battalion (90 th Rifles of Winnipeg)	15 th Battalion (48 th Highlanders of Toronto)
4 th Battalion (Central Ontario)	10 th Battalion (Alberta)	16 th Battalion (Canadian Scottish)

Note that in one article describing the components of the 1st Canadian Division formed in 1914/1915 it states that the 5th Battalion was known as the 'Western Cavalry'. However, in other army papers it states the 5th Bn is an Infantry Bn.