

## John Neil McIsaac - WW1



## Personal Profile

- Full Name: John Neil McIsaac (MacIsaac, ... p. 1).
- Date & Place of Birth: April 8, 1886, in Rear Georgeville, Antigonish County, Nova Scotia (MacIsaac, ... pp. 1, 5).
- Trade or Calling: Farmer (MacIsaac, ... pp. 1, 6).
- Marital Status: Single (MacIsaac, ... pp. 1, 6).
- Next-of-Kin: Allan John McIsaac (Father), residing in Rear Georgeville, Antigonish County, Nova Scotia (MacIsaac, ... pp. 1, 5).
- Regimental Number: 487479 (MacIsaac, ... p. 1).

## Units Served In

Private McIsaac served in several major units, shifting into specialized machine gun elements as the war progressed:

- 51st Overseas Infantry Battalion: Enlisted in this unit on December 2, 1915, at Edmonton, Alberta (MacIsaac, ... pp. 1, 7). He sailed with the battalion from Halifax aboard the S.S. *Missanabie* on April 18, 1916 (MacIsaac, ... pp. 5-6).
- 14th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment): Transferred upon arrival in England and deployed to the front lines in France on June 9, 1916 (MacIsaac, ... pp. 9, 17, 19).

*The 14th Battalion (Royal Montreal Regiment), CEF was an elite frontline infantry unit of the Canadian Expeditionary Force that compiled a legendary combat record on the Western Front during the First World War*

- 13th Canadian Machine Gun Company: Transferred into this heavy support unit on January 15, 1917, for continuous frontline deployment (MacIsaac, ... pp. 17, 19).

*The 13th Canadian Machine Gun Company (often referred to as part of the broader Canadian Machine Gun Corps or CMGC) was a highly specialized, heavy-weapons support unit (MacIsaac, ... p. 19). It was formed to maximize firepower on the Western Front by using advanced tactics with rapid-fire weaponry.*

- 1st Battalion, Canadian Machine Gun Corps (CMGC): Absorbed into this consolidated battalion stream on March 19, 1918, where he served through the final pushes of the war and the subsequent post-war occupation (MacIsaac, ... pp. 19, 21).

## ✂ Battles Fought In

Private McIsaac's units participated heavily on the Western Front, meaning he was engaged in multiple historic engagements (MacIsaac, ... pp. 9, 17, 21):

- The Battle of the Somme (1916): Served as an infantryman during the brutal, muddy summer and autumn campaigns (MacIsaac, ... p. 17).

The Battle of the Somme (fought from July 1 to November 18, 1916) was one of the largest, bloodiest, and most heavily contested strategic campaigns of the First World War (MacPherson... pp. 11-12). Fought along the banks of the Somme River in northern France, it pitted the joint British and French armies against the German Empire, becoming the defining symbol of industrial trench attrition.

When the Canadian Corps was moved south from Belgium to the Somme sector in late August 1916, these machine gunners played a revolutionary and deadly role in the broad Allied offensive.

Before the Somme, machine guns were used almost exclusively as defensive weapons fired horizontally at visible enemy targets. At the Somme, Canadian gunners helped pioneer indirect barrage fire. Gunners were positioned well behind their own advancing infantry lines. Using mathematical calculations, maps, and compasses, they angled their heavy, water-cooled Vickers machine guns high into the air. They fired over the heads of the advancing Canadian infantry, dropping a continuous, plunging "rain" of bullets into the German rear trenches, communication lines, and assembly points. This prevented German reinforcements from reaching the front lines during the chaos.

- The Battle of Vimy Ridge (April 1917): Supported the Canadian Corps advance as a machine gunner (MacIsaac, ... p. 17).

During the Battle of Vimy Ridge (April 9–12, 1917), the machine gunners of the 1st Canadian Division—then operating as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 13th Canadian Machine Gun Companies—executed what remains one of the largest and most scientifically precise mass machine-gun operations in military history. The Canadian Corps used a staggering total of 362 water-cooled Vickers machine guns across the ridge.

During his deployment at the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Private John Neil McIsaac was assigned to the 3rd Canadian Divisional Machine Gun Company. Because his service records track his frontline transfers, we can reconstruct exactly how he bypassed the 1st Division and fought at Vimy Ridge with a different unit. Upon arriving in Europe, he was not placed into the 1st Division. Instead, his 487-series regimental number reflects that he was assigned as a reinforcement to the Princess

Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI). The PPCLI fought under the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, which was part of the 3rd Canadian Division (not the 1st Division). Therefore, during the assault on Vimy Ridge on April 9, 1917, John Neil fought alongside the 3rd Canadian Divisional Machine Gun Company, which was directly assigned to support his brigade's push.

#### His Unit's Role on April 9, 1917

While the 1st Division fought on the far right flank of the ridge, John Neil's 3rd Division was assigned to the center-left sector of the battlefield. Their primary objective was to assault the steepest, most heavily fortified section of the high ground, code-named "The La Folie Farm" and the dense woods surrounding it. Operating under the 3rd Divisional Machine Gun Company, John Neil's unit faced specific challenges:

*The Brutal Ascent:* Unlike the relatively open plains on the right, the 3rd Division gunners had to haul their massive, 40-pound Vickers guns and heavy ammunition boxes up steep, muddy crater fields slick with fresh sleet and snow.

*Overhead Barrage Support:* His company's fixed-battery gun crews fired thousands of continuous rounds over the heads of the advancing PPCLI and the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR), blinding the German machine-gun nests hidden in the La Folie ruins.

*Consolidating the Crest:* Once the infantry successfully breached the German frontline trenches, John Neil's forward machine-gun teams dashed into the shattered remains of the German positions. They rapidly turned their guns toward the eastern slopes of the ridge, effectively breaking up the immediate German infantry counterattacks trying to scale back up the hill.

- The Battle of Passchendaele (Late 1917): Fought through the swamp-like artillery zones of Belgium (MacIsaac, ... p. 17).

During the Battle of Passchendaele (specifically the Second Battle of Passchendaele, from October 26 to November 10, 1917), Private John Neil MacIsaac and the 3rd Canadian Divisional Machine Gun Company were plunged into what is widely considered the most horrific mud-choked battlefield in human history. Operating a heavy Vickers machine gun in this sector required superhuman effort, as the entire landscape had been pulverized by artillery into a wasteland of deep, liquid clay and water-filled craters.

The 3rd Division launched its phase of the attack in the freezing rain on October 30. John Neil's company was deployed to give direct, heavy fire support to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) and the 49th (Edmonton) Battalion as they crawled through the swamp toward the German pillboxes.

Once the ridge positions were captured, the infantry was exhausted and depleted. John Neil and his fellow machine gunners became the primary defensive line. They set up their Vickers guns in isolated, shell-hole positions along the newly won crest. The German army launched frequent, desperate counterattacks through the mud to reclaim the high ground. Operating in freezing rain, the 3rd Division gunners fired tens of thousands of rounds, successfully breaking up every German advance before it could reach the fragile Canadian infantry lines.

- Canada's Hundred Days (August–November 1918): Advanced with the CMGC through the decisive breakthroughs at Amiens, Arras, and the Canal du Nord that brought about the Armistice (MacIsaac, ... pp. 18-19).

By the time the Battle of Amiens launched on August 8, 1918, the organization of the machine gunners had fundamentally changed. In March 1918, the independent divisional companies were permanently restructured into full combat battalions. Because Private John Neil MacIsaac fought under the 3rd Canadian Division, his unit was officially renamed the 3rd Battalion, Canadian Machine Gun Corps (CMGC). The Battle of Amiens was the spectacular opening offensive of the Hundred Days Campaign. It completely shifted the tactical playbook of the Western Front, and John Neil's machine-gun battalion was at the absolute spearhead of the breakthrough.

The primary tactical triumph at Amiens was secrecy. Unlike earlier battles where days of heavy artillery bombardment warned the enemy of an upcoming attack, the Canadian Corps achieved absolute surprise.

*The Silent Deployment:* In the dead of night leading up to August 8, John Neil's 3rd CMGC Battalion moved into position in total blackout conditions. They were strictly forbidden from firing a single registration shot or testing their Vickers guns, which would alert German listening posts.

*The Zero-Hour Fog:* At exactly 4:20 AM, amidst a thick, early-morning ground fog artificially enhanced by Allied smoke screens, the attack commenced.

Because the German lines collapsed rapidly under the surprise onslaught, Amiens did not become a slow, static trench battle. It transformed into a highly fluid, fast-moving war of movement.

## The Final Push and the Armistice

Following the breakthrough at Amiens, John Neil and the 3rd Battalion, Canadian Machine Gun Corps (CMGC) fought their way through the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line during the autumn of 1918.

- By November 11, 1918, when the Armistice was declared, his battalion had advanced deep into Belgium, ending the war near the city of Mons.
- For John Neil, surviving the war "unscathed" on paper meant he had evaded mortal wounds, but like thousands of machine gunners, his body was deeply worn down by continuous exposure to mustard gas, freezing mud, and the extreme physical toll of hauling heavy equipment.



## Injuries & Medical History

Private McIsaac was remarkably fortunate considering his extensive timeline on the Western Front; he survived without sustaining any physical combat wounds or gunshot injuries (MacIsaac, ... pp. 15, 23). His files document only one brief domestic illness prior to leaving Canada (MacIsaac, ... pp. 15, 24):

- Bronchitis: Admitted to the Edmonton Military Hospital on March 9, 1916, suffering from acute respiratory inflammation (MacIsaac, ... p. 24). He spent 7 days receiving routine hospital treatment, achieved a complete recovery, and was discharged fit for duty on March 15, 1916 (MacIsaac, ... p. 24).



## Discharge & Demobilization

- Return Voyage: Sailed back to Canada from England aboard the *H.M.T.S. Empress of Britain* on April 26, 1919 (MacIsaac, ... pp. 18, 39).
- Official Discharge: Formally discharged from service upon demobilization on May 10, 1919, at Toronto, Ontario, holding a physical description marker of a "small scar on chin" (MacIsaac, ... pp. 21, 35).
- Post-War Intentions: Listed his initial proposed post-war home destination as Fort George (Prince George), British Columbia (MacIsaac, ... pp. 9, 35, 39).

John Neil returned to the quiet farming community of Georgeville, attempting to resume the rural life he had left behind in 1915. However, the lasting physical strain of his wartime service eventually caught up with him. Seeking a fresh start or specialized medical care, he relocated out west to Alberta later in the 1920s. His health steadily declined, and on September 15, 1929, at the young age of 43, Private McIsaac passed away at the University Hospital in Edmonton. Recognizing his years of service facing down frontline artillery and gas attacks, the military honored him with a final resting place in the Soldiers' Plot at the Edmonton Cemetery, where his legacy is permanently preserved under a military marker.